



JAMES HADLEY

poche noire

CHASE

BLONDE'S REQUIEM



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1945

chapter one

One look at Cranville was enough.

As I drove down Main Street a smell of dirt and decay drifted in through the open windows of the Packard. In the far distance I could see the high brick stacks of the smelters stuck up against the skyline. They belched black smoke that had, in the course of time, yellow-smoked everything into uniform dinginess.

There was a sordid, undisciplined feeling about the town I didn't like. The first policeman I saw needed a shave, and two buttons from his uniform were missing. The second, directing traffic, had a cigar in his mouth.

The sidewalk, littered with papers and trash, was crowded. Groups of men stood around at street corners. Some of them read newspapers, while others tried to read over their shoulders. Women slouched past like they had something on their minds. Shops seemed empty; even the bartenders were standing outside in the sunshine. I didn't have to be told that Cranville was coiled up like a spring with suppressed anger and excitement. I could see it just by looking at the people.

I stopped at a drugstore and, using one of the phones, called Lewes Wolf. I told him I had arrived.

"Well, come on out." He sounded like a man used to getting his own way.

His voice was harsh and impatient. "You go through the town and turn right at the traffic lights. It's a mile or so further on."

I said I'd be right over and left the drugstore.

There was a small crowd of loafers around my car. I didn't cotton on at first.

As I started to ease my way through the crowd, I heard someone say: "That's the dick from New York."

I looked quickly over my shoulder, but I didn't stop. They were a sick, seedy-looking bunch, dirty, tired and angry. A guy with a big Adam's

apple said: "If you know what's good for you, you'll get the hell outa here." I was startled to see he was talking to me.

There was a murmur from the other guys. They edged closer and they looked like they wanted to take a poke at me.

I got the car door open quickly and slid under the steering wheel.

The guy with the Adam's apple shoved his lean unshaven face through the window. "Beat it, Gum-shoe," he said in a gritty voice. "We don't like your kind around here."

I had the engine running. "Take it easy," I said, wanting to hang one on his jaw, and I drove off. In the driving mirror I could see them staring after me.

I felt damp under my arms, but I wasn't here to fight bums. I had other things to do.

I found Wolf's house without difficulty. It was so big I couldn't miss it.

From the front wall a half-acre or so of fine green lawn spread in a gentle slope down to the street. The sidewalk and the parkway were both very wide and in the parkway the flowering bushes were worth seeing.

I left my car on the street, walked across the lawn and rang the bell in the brick portico under a peaked roof.

The manservant—a noiseless, sharp-eyed man of fifty—took me into Wolf's study. It was some place. There was tapestry on the blank roughened stucco walls, iron grilles imitating balconies outside high windows, heavy carved chairs and a marble-topped table with carved legs. Thirty years ago it could have been quite a room.

Wolf was sitting by the window waiting for me. He was big and fat. His head was almost perfectly round under the close-cropped white hair. He reminded me of an octopus with his beaky little nose and thin, cruel mouth.

His small, watery eyes crawled over me, but he didn't say anything.

"I called you five minutes ago," I said. "I'm an International Investigations operative, New York branch. You asked for a man to do some work."

“That’s what you say,” Wolf growled, peering at me suspiciously. “But how do I know who you’re from?”

I gave him my identity card. It had been designed by Colonel Forsberg, my chief, especially for suspicious, irritable clients like Wolf. It was a neat job. On the outside it had the silver shield of the International Investigations and inside it had my photograph and everything about me, including my thumbprint. It was countersigned by the New York District Attorney.

Wolf stared at the card longer than necessary. Maybe he enjoyed keeping me standing there. “I suppose it’s all right,” he grunted at last and tossed the card back to me. “Know why you’re here?”

I said I didn’t.

He fidgeted with his gold watch-chain, then he waved to a chair. “Sit down.”

I picked the most comfortable chair in the room, pulled it close to him and took the weight off my feet.

He stared out of the window for some minutes without saying anything. I don’t know whether he was trying to get my goat, but if he was, he didn’t succeed. I watched him, knowing that time was on my side.

“See that?” he suddenly barked, pointing out of the window.

I followed his finger. I had to lean forward before I caught a glimpse of the distant smokestacks.

“They were mine.”

I didn’t know whether to console him or congratulate him, so I didn’t say anything.

“I ran that mine for twenty years. I owned it, heart, stun and guts. I quit last month.” His fat face sagged as he said it, I grunted.

That seemed to annoy him. “A pup like you wouldn’t understand,” he snapped, his watery eyes gleaming. “I worked there twelve hours a day for twenty years and I miss it.”

I said I guessed he did.

He thumped on the arm of the chair. “Three days away from that mine

and I was crazy with boredom. Do you know what I'm going to do now?" He leaned forward, his face congested with excitement. "I'm going to be mayor of this damn town and I'm going to put it on its feet."

It wouldn't have surprised me if he'd gone for the White House.

"There are two other candidates," he went on, a grim note in his voice. "The election's in a month's time. That gives you three weeks to find the missing girls."

I didn't know what he was talking about. "What missing girls?"

He waved his hands impatiently. "I forget their names. My secretary will give you details. Three girls are missing. Esslinger and Macey are using the disappearances to get votes. That'll show you the kind of heels they are, but three can play at that game. Your job's to find the girls before either Esslinger or Macey fund 'em. I've paid Forsberg plenty, and God help you if you don't get results."

This was all Chinese to me. I saw he wasn't the kind of guy to bother with details. It was a waste of time to sit and listen to him.

"Maybe I'd better talk to your secretary," I said, getting up.

"She'll tell you." He nodded his round head vigorously. "Only remember, I'm going to be mayor of this town. When I want something, I get it. Understand?"

I said I did.

He rang a bell. A girl of nineteen or twenty, small, pale and scared, came in.

She wore glasses and she looked as if she could have used a meal.

"This is a detective," Wolf harked at her. "Take him away and tell him what he wants to know."

She looked at me curiously and moved to the door.

I stood up.

Wolf said: "Remember what I said . . . results. Don't come here until you've something to tell me."

I said I'd have something for him before long and followed the girl out

of the room. She took me across the lobby into a smaller room, equipped as an office.

“I’m Marc Spewack,” I said, as she closed the door. “I hope I’m not fording up your work.”

She again looked at me curiously. Maybe she had never seen a detective before. “What did you want to know?” she asked, moving round behind her desk.

I sat down on a hard chair. There was no comfort in this little room.

“Mr. Wolf wrote my chief, Colonel Forsberg, sent him a cheque and asked him to handle a case for him. He didn’t say what the case was. I’m doing the work, so I want to know what it’s all about.”

She sat down. “Then I’d best give you a brief account of what’s been happening,” she said.

I said that’d be fine.

“About a month ago,” she began, in a low, monotonous voice, “a girl named Luce McArthur disappeared. Her father works in a drugstore on the corner of Sydney and Murray. A couple of days later another girl disappeared. She was the daughter of a janitor named Dengate. A week after that a third girl, named Joy Kunz, disappeared. Mr. Wolf went to Chief of Police Macey to find out what was being’ done about the missing girls. You see, there was a great deal of unrest in town. Parents were naturally anxious and the local press were hinting that there was a mass killer at large.

“As a result of Mr. Wolf’s visit, the police started a search. They went to all the empty houses in Cranville and in one of them they found a shoe that belonged to Joy Kunz. They didn’t find anything else, nor have they any clues even now. The finding of the shoe started a panic in Cranville. Mr. Wolf thought he’d get experts in and that’s why he’s sent for you.” She stopped talking and made a row of fingerprints along the polished edge of her desk.

“That clears the air,” I said, admiring the way she had given me the story.

“Who’s Esslinger?”

“He’s the local mortician.” She didn’t look at me while she talked. “He’s running for the election too.”

“A mortician?” I was startled.

When she didn’t elaborate, I said, “What are his chances of becoming mayor?”

She made more fingerprints before saying: “Very good, I believe. The workers like him.” I thought there was a hint in her voice that she liked him too. But I couldn’t swear to that.

Anyway, I couldn’t imagine the workers liking Wolf, but I didn’t say so. “Mr. Wolf thinks that if he finds the girls he’ll win popularity and get elected mayor, is that it?”

She nodded. “Something like that.”

“What does Esslinger say?”

“He’s started an investigation too.”

I was vaguely surprised. “Who’s working for him?”

“Cranville has its own local agent,” she said. “Mr. Esslinger didn’t want strangers meddling with Cranville’s private affairs.”

I looked at her sharply. “That sounds as if you agree with him.”

She flushed and said: “My opinions don’t matter.”

There was a pause while I stared at her, then I said: “Why didn’t Mr. Wolf employ your local agent?”

Her mouth tightened. “He hasn’t any confidence in women,” she told me.

“You see, the agency’s run by a woman.”

That was comforting news to me, I didn’t have much confidence in women myself. I thought for a moment and then asked: “What do the police think?”

“They won’t help either Mr. Wolf or Mr. Esslinger. Chief of Police Macey has his own candidate.”

I laughed.

Her mouth looked less prim, but she didn’t look up. “It’s a little complicated,” she admitted. “Chief of Police Macey wants Rube

Starkey to be mayor, so he is carrying out his own investigation.”

“Who’s Starkey?”

She shook her head. “I’m afraid I don’t know anything about him except he’s a gambler and I don’t think he’s a very desirable person to be mayor.”

“Well, that’s not bad considering you don’t know anything about him,” I said, with a smile. “What about these girls? Any angles?”

“They’ve just disappeared. Nothing has been found so far.”

“I see.” I selected a cigarette from my ease and lit it. This looked a hell of a case. “Let me get all this right. There are three separate investigations going on to find these girls. Wolf, Esslinger and Macey know that whoever finds them has the best chance of becoming mayor. I’m not likely to get any help from the police and I won’t be popular in Cranville because I’m an outsider. Esslinger’s investigator is likely to get support from Cranville, but not from the, police. Thu about it, isn’t it?”

She said it was.

I remembered the bunch of men who had surrounded my car. If that was going to happen to me every five minutes, I was going to have a swell time.

“Excitement is pretty high, isn’t it?”

“People are worried because nothing’s been done,” she said. “Some of them went down to police headquarters and broke some windows last night.” She sounded very calm about it all.

I thought they’d be breaking my neck if I didn’t watch out.

“Can you give me the names and addresses of all the people you’ve mentioned?”

She opened a drawer and took out a sheet of paper. “I thought you’d want that,” she said.

I thanked her and put the paper in my pocket.

“I’ll poke around,” I said, getting up. “Maybe I’ll have something for Mr. Wolf in a day or so.”

She suddenly looked straight at me. It was a shock to see she was hating me. Being a worker, I guessed she was on Esslinger's side. With Wolf for a boss, I didn't blame her, but it was a shock all the same. I could see how complicated it was all going to be.

"Is there somewhere where I can leave my car?" I asked.

She looked puzzled. "Leave your car?" she repeated.

"It carries New York licence plates. They don't seem popular around here. Some guys have already told me so."

For a split second she looked pleased, then she got her expression under control. "You can leave it in the garage around toe back. There's plenty of room."

I thanked her. "I didn't get your name," I said at the door.

"Wilson." She flushed and looked embarrassed.

"You've been a big help, Miss Wilson," I said. "I hope I haven't taken up too much of your time."

She said it was all right and pulled the typewriter towards her.

* * *

I booked a room at the Eastern Hotel on Main Street, dumped my bags and went out into the heat again. I took a cab out to McArthur's place.

The cab driver seemed to be in a hurry to get rid of me. He went through a red light with a policeman standing a yard away. The policeman didn't even bother to look up. I thought Chief of Police Macey must be a pretty dumb cop.

Four minutes' furious driving brought us to a grim, sordid street, flanked either side by dirty tenements. Metal fire escapes crawled up the front of the buildings and men and women stood or sat on the iron steps in isolated groups.

Faces looked into the street at the sound of the cab. Some of the women shouted in through the open windows, not wanting their husbands to miss anything.

I knew I had made a mistake coming in a cab. I told the driver to keep on.

“The address you want is right here,” he said, slowing down.

I told him to keep going, and with a quick scowl over his shoulder he drove on. At the end of the street he turned left and I told him to stop. I gave him fifty cents and walked away before he could say anything.

I walked round the block, giving the rubbernecks time to calm down. Then I sauntered down the street towards McArthur’s place.

All the way I felt eyes watching me. I didn’t look up, but I knew the rubbernecks were wondering who I was and who I was going to see. That’s the worst of working a small town like Cranville. Everyone knows everyone else and a stranger sticks out like a boil.

McArthur’s place was a five-storey brick building, halfway down the street. I was glad to get into the lobby, out of the sight of prying eyes. There were six mailboxes; McArthur was on the third floor.

I went up. The stairs were uncarpeted, but clean. There was a stale smell of cooking, but otherwise the house wasn’t so bad.

I rapped on a door on the third floor and waited.

The door was opened by a little man in shirt, trousers and slippers. He wore no collar and he hadn’t shaved. His thin, yellow face looked sad. “Yes, please?” he asked, peering at me through thick glasses.

“Mr. McArthur?”

He nodded. I could see he was surprised to be called mister. He looked like a guy who had been kicked around plenty in his day.

“It’s about your daughter,” I said, watching him carefully.

Fear and hope crowded into his eyes and he had to steady himself against the door. “Have—have they found her?” he said with pathetic, crushed eagerness.

“Not yet.” I moved a step forward. “I’d like to come in a moment.”

His face sagged with disappointment, but he stood aside. “We’re in a bit of a mess,” he muttered apologetically. “It ain’t easy to keep things going with this hanging over us.”

I made sympathetic noises and closed the door. The room was clean, small and poorly furnished. Some stockings and women's underclothes hung on a string across one side of the room.

McArthur stood by the table and looked at me questioningly. "Who did you say you were from?"

I took out my identity card and waved the shield at him. Before he could take a good look, it was back in my pocket. "I'm checking on your daughter's disappearance," I said. "Give me the help I want and I'll get her back."

"Of course," he said eagerly. "What did you want to know? So many people have been around asking questions." He twisted his fingers. "But nothing's been done."

I sat on the corner of the table. "What do you think's happened to her?"

"I don't know." He tried to control his hands, but he wasn't successful. They reminded me of two white fluttering moths. "I don't seem able to think properly since it happened."

"Was she unhappy at home? I mean do you think she's run away or something like that?"

He shook his head helplessly. "She was a good girl. She had a good job and she was happy."

"Do you believe this stuff about a mass-killer being at large?"

He sat down abruptly and hid his face in his hands. "I don't know."

He wasn't helping much.

"You know these disappearances are being used to gain votes for the coming election," I said as patiently as I could. "It's not possible, is it, that these girls are being paid to duck out of sight? I mean your girl wouldn't do a thing like that?"

"Whatever's happened to Luce has happened against her will," he whispered.

"You don't think she's dead, do you, mister?"

I thought it was likely, but I didn't say so. Before I could go on, the door jerked open and a big, grey-haired woman came in. Her eyes

were swollen and red and stony.

“Who is it, Tom?” she said, going to him.

McArthur looked vague and uneasy. “Someone about Luce.”

“It’s all right, Mrs. McArthur,” I said hastily, “I’m helping with the investigation.”

She looked me over and her mouth tightened. “You’re working for Wolf.”

She got excited about that. Turning on McArthur, she said: “You fool! Why did you let him in? He’s Wolf’s spy.”

McArthur looked pleadingly at her. “He’s going to help,” he explained anxiously. “We want all the help we can, Mary.”

She walked to the door and threw it open. “Get out!” she said to me.

I shook my head. “You don’t understand, Mrs. McArthur,” I said soothingly.

“The more people in on this, the quicker we’ll get results. You want your daughter back and I can help you. It won’t cost you-anything.”

“He’s right, Mary,” McArthur said eagerly. “He only wants to help.”

“I’m taking no help from a louse like Wolf,” the woman said, and she went out, closing the door violently.

McArthur wrung his hands. “You’d better go,” he said. “She’s gone for her brother.”

I didn’t care if she’d gone for the Marines. “Take it easy,” I said, not moving.

“Why does she hate Wolf? What’s he done to get her that way?”

“Most folks hate him. Leastways, those who’ve worked for him,” McArthur said, looking anxiously at the door. “You’ll find them all the same.”

The woman came back. With her was a thickset man of about forty. He was full of toughness and self-confidence.

“Is this the fella?” he said to Mrs. McArthur.

“Yes.” There was a triumphant note in her voice which annoyed me.

He came over to me. “Get out and stay out,” he said, poking his finger at my chest. “We don’t want a spying louse like you around here.”

I took his finger and gave it a little jerk. It was a trick I’d picked up from a guy who’d spent some time in China.

The man fell on his knees with a howl of pain and I grinned at him. “Don’t be a sissy,” I said, helping him up. “Can’t you take a joke?”

He toppled into a chair and held his hand, moaning.

I went to the door. “You’re all crazy,” I said to them. “Can’t you see you’re wasting time? I can find the girl if you’ll let me. It’s your business, of course, but she’s been missing for four weeks. No one’s turned up anything yet. If that gives you confidence, then I’m sorry for you. If I don’t find her, I’ll find the other two. By that time she won’t be worth finding. Think it over. I’m at the Eastern Hotel. If you want my help, come and see me. And don’t think I care one way or the other.”

I didn’t stop to see how they took it, but walked out of the room and closed the door quietly behind me.

* * *

The Cranville Gazette was on the fourth floor of a dilapidated building sandwiched between a large cut-rate emporium and a drugstore. The small, dark lobby was dirty and harboured the stale smell of bodies and tobacco smoke. The lift wasn’t working so I climbed the four flights of stairs.

I wandered around the fourth floor until I came to a door lettered in flaked black paint on pebbled glass: Cranville Gazette.

I turned the knob and went into a small, narrow room with two windows, a battered typewriter desk, a number of filing cases and a threadbare carpet.

A woman turned from the window and looked at me without much interest.

She was forty, thin, frowzy and full of vinegar.

"The editor in?" I said, tipping my hat and trying to look more pleased to see her than she did to see me.

"Who is it?" she asked in a way that told me the editor didn't have many visitors.

"The name's Spewack," I said. "And I'm not here to sell him anything or to waste his time."

She opened a door which I hadn't noticed before at the far end of the room.

She shut the door behind her.

I leaned against the wall and lit a cigarette. I decided for an editorial office this was pretty punk. The newspaper, I thought, was a worthy representative of the town.

The woman came back. "Mr. Dixon will spare you a few minutes." I walked down the narrow room, smiled at her and entered the inner room.

If anything, it was more dreary than the outer office. In a swivel chair at the desk sat an elderly number in a blue serge suit which looked like it had been nickel-plated. A pale-grey bald patch loomed high up in the middle of stringy white hair.

He had sharp blue-green eyes and his beaky nose looked as if it had hung over a lot of quick ones in his time.

"Mr. Spewack?" he said in a fruity baritone.

I nodded.

"Take a chair, Mr. Spewack." He waved a fat hairy hand at the chair across the desk. "I'm always glad to meet a visitor to our little town." He paused and stared at me with a calculating expression in his eyes. "You are a visitor, I suppose?"

I sat down. "More or less," I said, hitching the chair a little nearer to his desk. "Before I tell you my business, I'd like to ask you a question."

He dug his little finger in his ear and worked it around for a while. Then he pulled it out, examined his nail and wiped it on his trouser-leg. "Anything you like," he said, smiling. His bridgework was ill

fitting and yellow and the smile didn't reach his eyes.

"Do you care who becomes mayor of this town?" I asked, shooting it out fast.

He hadn't expected that. He closed his eyes quickly and huddled into his clothes like a startled tortoise. "Now I wonder why you should ask that," he said, after a pause.

"Couldn't you say yes or no in a nice straightforward manner?" I said, tapping ash on the threadbare carpet.

He looked at me sharply and considered this. "I suppose so," he said cautiously. "But I don't see why I should. I don't discuss politics with strangers, Mr. Spewack."

We eyed each other. "You don't have to make me a stranger," I said. "If you put your cards on the table, we might see a lot of each other."

He considered this too, then he suddenly laughed. It was a harsh sound like the bark of a hyena. "You're a character, sir," he said, washing his hands over the blotter. "Why shouldn't you know a little thing like that? Very well, then, let me, as you suggest, put my cards on the table. There is very little to choose between Mr. Wolf and Mr. Starkey as mayors. Mr. Esslinger, however, would be better. Taken by and large, it wouldn't greatly matter to me who got in. I am able to regard the election as an unprejudiced spectator."

"That's fair enough," I said, taking out my identity card. I handed it to him.

He examined it with genuine interest. After he had been over it long enough to learn the contents by heart, he handed it back. "A very interesting little document," he said, and again dug his finger in his ear. "I guessed you were the detective from New York the moment I saw you."

I was watching him closely to see if he was going to turn hostile, but his expression didn't change.

"You might be able to help me," I said, putting the identity card back in my pocket.

"I might," Dixon returned, tapping on the dirty ink-stained blotter. "But I don't see why I should. I'm not helping anyone else, Mr. Spewack."

I smiled at him. "Maybe they don't need your help," I returned. "All I want is a little inside information about Cranville. I'm authorized to pay for all information."

He closed his eyes, but not before I saw interest and greed jump into them.

"Very interesting," he muttered under his breath. "Now I wonder what kind of information you'd want."

"I understand Chief of Police Macey wants Rube Starkey to become mayor. Can you tell me why?"

He pulled at his beaky nose and turned this over very thoughtfully. "I wouldn't like to give you my personal opinion, but I don't mind giving you the opinion of the town . . . if that's any use to you."

"Go ahead," I said, knowing that it'd be his opinion anyway.

"The trouble with Cranville," he began, folding his hands on the blotter and looking at me with shrewd, sly eyes, "is this. For the past twenty years all the mayors have been elected on a reform ticket. Cranville has been so reformed that there're no real opportunities to circulate money. The working man, Mr. Spencer has to be encouraged to spend his spare money if a town is to flourish. It is a lamentable fact that unless the methods of encouragement are of a questionable nature, big profits are limited.

"Twenty years ago, Cranville had four gambling-houses, a racetrack, two excellent nightclubs and even a little organised vice. People spent their money, enjoyed themselves, and the town flourished. All these places have been closed down. It makes a big difference"

He picked up a pencil and began to draw a cube on the blotting paper.

"Macey wants Starkey to become Mayor because he'll promote the kinds of entertainment that will be lucrative to Macey. Macey wishes to reopen the gambling-houses, nightclubs and even the racetrack. Starkey has had a lot of experience and could easily do it"

He finished drawing his cube and began rolling the pencil under his hand across the blotter. "Macey isn't a very good policeman, but he is an excellent business man."

"If Starkey gains control, Cranville may be in for a life of crime, is that it?" I made a sound like I didn't care one way or the other.

“Very likely, Mr. Spewack. I should say it was very likely.” He smiles at me.

“Only don’t quote me. I would not like everyone to know my views ...not just now anyway.”

“Suppose Esslinger got in?”

“Well, Esslinger’s a different proposition. I think things might improve. I don’t know, of course. He is a little too anti-capitalist to be really comfortable in Cranville, but he is a very sincere man.”

“Tell me about him,” I invited.

Dixon leaned back in his chair and placed his fingertips together. “Now let me see,” he said, frowning at the dirty ceiling, “He came to Cranville thirty years ago. He was assistant at Morley’s Funeral Parlor for some time, and when Mr. Morley died he took over the business. He was and still is a hard, painstaking worker and has done a lot of good for the town. He is liked and trusted. You will like him Mr. Spewack, although you may not like his wife.” He glanced out of the window and shook his head. “A very strong-minded woman. It has always puzzled me why Esslinger ever married her.” He lowered his voice.

“She drinks.”

I grunted.

“Then there’s his son,” Dixon went on. “An excellent fellow. Takes after his father in every way. Clever, full of brains. Studying medicine and, I imagine, has a brilliant career in front of him.” He dug his finger in his ear again. “His mother dotes on him. She has no other interest, except, of course, the bottle.” He shook his head at the tiny bit of wax he had levered out of his ear.

“Has he any money?” I asked.

Dixon pursed his lips. “Esslinger? Depends on what you call money. He has a very nice little business. People die. In fact a lot of people die in Cranville. It isn’t what you would call a healthy town.” He looked at me with a sly smirk. “At least not for everyone.”

“I’ve gathered that,” I said dryly. “But I don’t scare easily.”

We eyed each other and then I fished out a packet of Camels and

tossed him one. "What do you think's to those girls who've disappeared?" I asked lighting up.

"What I think and what I print in y paper are two different things," he said cautiously. "I have a young man who works for me, covering the local news. He is a sensationalist. It was he who convinced me that the mass-killer theory would increase our circulation." He showed his yellow teeth in a foxy smile. "He was right, Mr. Spewack; it has."

"But you don't believe it?"

He shook his head. "I don't."

"What's your theory?"

Again he shook his head. "Never mind about my theories, Mr. Spewack. You don't want to clutter up your mind with the theories of an old man."

"Come on, loosen up," I urged. "I want all the help I can get."

But I could see he was going to be obstinate. "There is one thing worth considering," he said. "If those girls have been murdered, where are the bodies?"

"I've thought of that," I said. "Maybe you have an idea?"

"No ideas," he returned promptly. "You must expect to do a little work on this case yourself. No doubt Mr. Wolf is paying you well."

"So-so," I said and decided to let his theories drift. "Esslinger's engaged a woman investigator, hasn't he?"

I went on after a pause.

"A most charming young woman," Dixon said, and gave the nearest thing he could to a leer. "You'll like her. Of course, she's had no experience as an investigator."

"She's getting nowhere?"

Dixon shook his head and smiled. "I don't think anyone expected her to," he said, underlining the "anyone."

"That go for Esslinger, too?" I said, watching him closely.

"He nodded, but didn't say anything."

“And yet Esslinger has hired her.”

“And he doesn’t think she’ll break the case? That does not make sense.”

Dixon picked up his pencil and began another cube.

“I can only suggest an idea here and there,” he said apologetically. “You mustn’t expect me to do your work for you, Mr. Spewack.”

I leaned back in my chair and looked at him thoughtfully. We sat for a few minutes in silence. I knew he wasn’t going to elaborate, so I tried another angle.

“What do you know about the missing girls?”

He pulled open a drawer and took out three photographs, the kind that are taken by street cameramen. He gave them to me. “I assure you, Mr. Spewack, they are ordinary working-class girls with no secrets and with nothing extraordinary about them.”

Looking at the photographs, I believed him. They were the type you could see in any street, in any day, in any town.

“Have they anything in common besides being all blondes?” I asked, handing the photographs back.

He opened his mouth to say something, when the telephone rang. He stared at the telephone with a blank, surprised look in his eyes. “Excuse me,” he said, picking up the receiver. He held it gingerly against his ear.

I sat back, watching him absently.

He said, “Are you there?” and listened.

Faintly I could hear a voice talking over the line. It was a sharp, high-pitched staccato voice, but I couldn’t understand what it was saying.

Dixon suddenly huddled into his clothes. “I understand,” he mumbled into the mouthpiece of the telephone. “Yes, of course. Yes. . . . naturally.” He listened some more, then I heard a click as the caller hung up on him. He very slowly put the receiver back on its cradle and stared down at his blotter. I saw a little cluster of sweat beads on his forehead which hadn’t been there before.

“Have they anything in common besides being all blondes?” I repeated

after a long pause.

He started, then stared at me as if he'd forgotten was still there. "I'm afraid I can't spare any more of my time, Mr. Spewack," he said, looking hurriedly away.

"It's been very interesting to meet you." He got up and offered me a damp, limp hand. His face was the colour of white mutton fat and high up near his right eye a nerve twitched. "I don't think you'd better come here again, Mr. Spewack. Your time's valuable and I wouldn't like to waste it."

"Don't worry about my time," I said. "I'll take care of that." I took out my pocket book and let him see the twenty-five dollar bills I had in it. "And I'll buy your time, so you don't have to worry about that either."

"Very thoughtful of you," he said. There was no interest in his voice or his eyes. "But I have nothing to sell. Do you understand, Mr. Spewack? Nothing to sell."

I put the pocket book away and stared at him thoughtfully. "Who was that on the telephone?" I said.

"No one you'd know," he returned, sitting limply in his chair. "Good day, Mr. Spewack, I'm sure you can find your own way out."

I put my hands on the desk and leaned over him. "I bet it was Macey or maybe Starkey," I said, watching him. "I bet you were told to keep your trap shut or else. Wasn't that it?"

He huddled deeper into his clothes and shut his eyes. "Good day, Mr. Spewack," he said softly.

"So long," I said, and went out.

The vinegar-faced woman looked up as I passed.

"The old guy's got cold feet," I said. "You'd better light him a fire."

I felt her eyes on my back, but I didn't look round. I shut the outer office door behind me and walked slowly down the four flights of stairs. I found myself whistling in an absent-minded way Chopin's "Funeral March."

The Eastern Hotel was a rambling three-storey brick building with metal fire escapes on the front. There were a dozen or so rocking chairs on the porch.

I went up the steps and across the verandah and into the lobby. I saw potted palms and heavy mahogany furniture and brass spittoons.

The clerk at the reception desk was fussing with the register. A girl stood at the desk. She was tall; gold hair rested on the collar of her grey-and-blue check dress. On her arm she carried a light grey dustcoat and at her feet stood a bag, covered with hotel labels.

I came up to the desk and waited.

The clerk said to the girl: "Have you a reservation?"

She said she hadn't.

He looked doubtfully at her and I had a feeling he was going to refuse her.

"Why should anyone need a reservation?" I said to him. "You've more vacant rooms than a dog's got fleas."

He gave me a cold, impersonal stare, but shoved the register at the girl. She gave me a quick glance and then signed her name. She was pretty in a sensible way. Her skin was good and her features small and regular.

The clerk gave me my key and I went across to the lift. A negro porter picked up the girl's bag and joined me. The girl came over a moment later and we all travelled up to the third floor together.

The negro porter unlocked a door opposite mine and showed her in while I was unlocking my door. I turned before I went into my room to look at her. She was already looking at me.

"Thanks," she said, and gave me a nice smile.

"Maybe it would have been better if you'd've tried elsewhere," I said. "This is a pretty lousy hotel."

"It's a lot better than some," she said, smiled again and went into the room.

I closed my door.

The room wasn't anything to shout about. It had a small bed by the window.

A bureau with a white stain where some gin had been spilled and a couple of big chairs. On the table by the bed was an old-fashioned telephone with an unpainted metal base and a transparent celluloid mouthpiece. Beyond the clothes cupboard was a bathroom.

I took off my hat and sat down in one of the chairs. Streetcars rattled past the hotel and the whine of the lift as it crawled between floors indicated that there wasn't going to be a lot of peace for me in this room.

I lit a cigarette and decided I could do with a drink. I went over to the telephone and told the clerk to send up some Scotch and Whiterock. Then I went back to the chair again and thought about Wolf and Dixon and Esslinger. After turning it all over in my mind, I came to the conclusion that before long I would run into trouble. I didn't mind that so much, because I'd run into trouble before.

But I thought I'd better let Colonel Forsberg know as he had special rates which he charged if his operators ran into trouble.

I was beginning to compose the report I intended to send Colonel Forsberg without actually writing it down when a knock came on the door.

Thinking it was the Scotch and Whiterock, I called, "Come in," without getting up.

A girl's voice said: "I've done such a silly thing. I've lost the key to my bag."

I turned and stood up.

She had taken off her hat and she looked even nicer without it. She stood in the doorway, holding the doorknob in her hand, looking at me hopefully. I noticed that she had long thighs and nice legs.

"How did you know I've been picking locks since I left school?" I said. "I thought I was concealing it from even my best friends."

She laughed. "Oh, I didn't know," she said. "I thought you'd be able to do something because you are big and intelligent-looking."

“Won’t you come in?” I said, waving to the other armchair. “There’s some Scotch and Whiterock on their way up. My mother doesn’t like me to drink alone.”

She hesitated, then closed the door and walked over to the armchair. She sat down, pulled her skirt over her knees and looked up at me. “I really only wanted you to open my bag,” she said.

“Don’t worry about your bag “ I returned, sitting down again. “ I’ll do that after we’ve had a drink. I’ve only been in this town three hours and I’m lonely already.”

“Are you?” She seemed surprised. “I wouldn’t have thought you’d ever be lonely.”

“Only in this town,” I said. “There’s something about it that I don’t like. It isn’t friendly. Haven’t you noticed it?”

She shook her head. “I’ve only just arrived. Shall we introduce ourselves, or would you rather we didn’t?”

“Spewack’s the name,” leaning back and enjoying everything about her. “Marc Spewack. I’m a sleuth.”

“You don’t have to kid me,” she said seriously. “I’ve been around too long for that. Are you selling something?”

I shook my head. “Only my brains,” I said. “They’re fetching high prices in Cranville.” I gave her one of my cards.

She studied it and gave it back. “So you are a sleuth.” She looked at me curiously. It’s funny how dames always look at me like that when they hear what I am. I was getting quite used to it. “I’m Marian French,” she went on. “I sell a snappy line in lingerie.” She made a little face. “The trouble is a town like this thinks snappy lingerie isn’t very nice. I’ll have a lot of opposition.” She touched her hair with long fingers. “But I’m used to opposition by now.”

The negro porter came in with the Scotch and Whiterock. He looked at me and then at Marian French; then he rolled his eyes. I gave him some loose change and got rid of him.

“I haven’t seen anyone in this town so far who looks like a proposition for snappy lingerie,” I said, stripping the tissue paper off the Scotch bottle. “Apart from you,” I added on second thoughts. “How do you like your poison?”

She shook her head. "My mother told me not to drink hard liquor with strangers. I'll have the Whiterock straight."

"Sure?"

"Sure."

I gave her a half-glass of Whiterock, poured myself a stiff whisky and sat down again.

"Here's to a lot of luck with your silk glamour," I said, and put half the whisky away. It tasted good, and it was only after it had hit my belly that I realized how badly I needed it.

"Are you working here or on vacation?" she asked, stretching out her long legs and relaxing in the chair.

"Working," I told her, thinking it would be nice to have a girl around more often. Only she'd have to be a nice girl like Marian French. I didn't want the kind of floozy who is easy to get into a bedroom. "Haven't you heard? Three blondes disappeared from Cranville during the past four weeks. I've been hired to find them."

"That's easy," she said. "Why don't you tell the police? They'll do all the work and you'll get the money. I wish I had someone to sell my specialities for me. But I have to do all my own work."

I finished my drink. "I hadn't thought of that," I said. "It's an idea at that."

"I'm full of ideas," she said, a little wearily. "But they don't get me anywhere. Two years ago I had an idea that I'd get married and raise some children." She closed her eyes and rested her head against the back of the chair. "But it didn't work out,"

I wondered if she wanted sympathy; then looking at her profile and the firm line of her mouth I decided she didn't. She was taking the opportunity of letting off a little steam to a guy she had decided she could trust. That was all right with me.

"Never mind," I said lightly. "You're not a withered old maid yet. You'll catch someone."

She smiled. "I've got to unpack," she said, drawing in her legs and standing up. "This is a record. You're the first friendly, nice man I've met in two years."

“You haven’t been trying,” I said, getting up too. “Come on, show me your bag. I want to see if I’ve lost my old cunning.”

She wasn’t listening. Her eyes were fixed on the floor by the door with the kind of expression a girl will have when she thinks she’s seen a mouse.

I followed her gaze. A white square envelope was being pushed gently under the door. As I looked at it, it stopped coming further into the room. I took a step towards the door, collided with her, pushed her gently aside and jerked open the door. I looked up and down the long passage, but there was no one around. I picked up the envelope and put it in my pocket.

“Now you see what kind of a hotel this is,” I said carelessly. “They hand you your check before you’ve been here an hour.”

“Are you sure it’s a check?” she asked, a puzzled, curious expression in her eyes.

“Maybe the nigger likes me and wants me to go out with him.” I took her by her elbow and pushed her gently from the room, across the passage and into her room. You’d be surprised how coy some of these niggers are.”

I opened her bag with a hairpin she lent me. It didn’t take me a minute. “Do you see?” I said, smiling at her. “I’m not called Picklock Harry by my friends for nothing.”

“I thought your name was Marc?” she said.

“So it is, but I don’t tell everyone that.” I went over to the door and opened it. “Suppose you and me get acquainted? How about having dinner with me tonight?”

She looked at me thoughtfully. I could see what was going in her mind.

“Don’t go mixing me up with the local masher,” I said gently. “I don’t have any strings hanging to my invitations.”

She blushed faintly and laughed. “Sorry,” she said quickly, “but I’ve had too many experiences. A girl in my position develops a lot of arm muscles pushing off gentlemen with high blood pressure. I’m feeling a little tired tonight, so I didn’t want anything like that.”

“There’s nothing up my sleeve,” I said. “But skip it if you’d rather.”

“I’d love to,” she returned. “Give me time for a bath. Eight o’clock?”

“Eight o’clock,” I said, and left her.

I went back to my room, took out the envelope from my pocket and opened it. The note inside was typewritten:

You have twelve hours to get out of town. We won’t tell you again. You won’t even know what hit you. It’s not because we don’t like you, we do, but there isn’t enough air in Cranville for us all. So be a wise guy and dust. We’ll fix the funeral if you don’t.

I poured myself out another drink and sat down. The guy who had slipped this under my door must be in one of the rooms either side of mine. He couldn’t have run down the passage and out of sight in the time it had taken me to reach the door.

I stared at the wall opposite me and then at the wall behind me. I wondered which room he was in and whether he was sitting there wondering what I was going to do. The idea gave me a spooky feeling.

I put the letter carefully away, thought for a moment, then went over to the table to write my report to Colonel Forsberg. I had an hour and a half before I saw Marian French again. In that time I had to write to Forsberg, take a bath and decide whether I was going to leave town tomorrow morning or not.

I sat at the table thinking, then I reached for my bag, opened it and took out a black Police .38. I let it lie in my hand while I stared out of the window at the traffic. Then I shoved it down the waistband of my trousers and adjusted my vest points over the butt.

chapter two

“I think,” Marian French said calmly, “we are being followed.”

We had finished dinner and were on our way back to the hotel. A large, sullen-looking moon hung in the cloudless sky and floodlit the street. The night air was stifling and I carried my coat on my arm.

Marian, in a light summer frock, her hat in her hand, had wanted to walk back to the hotel. It was just after ten o'clock when we left the restaurant and we had crossed the street and were walking in the deep shadows when she made the remark.

I glanced down at her. “Sure all those ice drinks aren’t upsetting your judgment?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I don’t think so. Don’t look now, but have a feeling someone is interested in us.”

I didn’t want any trouble just then. There was no reason to mix Marian up in my affairs. I looked around for a taxi, but the long street was deserted. I glanced back over my shoulder, but the shadows from the houses were too dark to get a clear view of the street.

“I don’t see anyone,” I said, increasing my stride. “Did you?”

“There was a man standing opposite the restaurant when we came out. He started after us, but I lost sight of him. I didn’t think anything of it until I saw him again as he passed under a street light. He dodged into a doorway as I looked back. The sudden way he did it gave me the heebies. Perhaps I’m a little nervy tonight.”

She put her slim hand in mine and squeezed my fingers.

“What was he like?”

“I didn’t see him clearly,” she returned. “He was big, but I couldn’t make out how he was dressed or what he looked like.”

“Okay,” I said. “Don’t get excited. Maybe he isn’t following us, but if he is we’ll soon find out. We’ll turn the next corner and you go on. The clatter you make with your heels ought to fox him. I’ll wait for him and give him a surprise.”

“Is that a good idea?” She looked anxiously up into my face. “He might be dangerous.”

I grinned at her. “He won’t be. They never arc.” I opened my coat and my fingers touched the smooth butt of the .38. “There’s a turning just ahead. You go straight on. Can you find your way back to the hotel if I’m delayed?”

“I think so,” she said, a little doubtfully. “Are you sure you’re doing the right thing? You don’t want to be—hurt. I wouldn’t like—”

“That’s all right,” I said, patting her hand. “In my job this kind of thing happens every so often. I haven’t been hurt yet.”

We turned the corner and I gave her a little push forward. “On your way, honey,” I said softly, “and make those heels ring.”

She gave me a quick look and went on. Her wooden heels clicked steadily on the brick pavement.

I put my hand on my gun and leaned against the wall, watching the corner.

All I could hear was the distant roar of the traffic on Main Street, the fading sound of Marian’s heels on the sidewalk and the ticking of my wristwatch.

I stood there for several minutes, then I heard light footsteps approaching. I loosened my gun a trifle and waited. At the corner the footfalls slowed and then stopped. There was a long pause of silence; even the traffic seemed to have ceased to hurtle along Main Street.

I didn’t move. I stood close against the wall, breathing gently through my nose while I strained to hear the slightest sound.

Whoever it was round the corner coughed suddenly. A low, smothered cough that startled me. I half drew the gun and then, grinning savagely to myself, shoved it back again.

There came a faint sound and then a long starved shadow edged forward along the brick pavement ahead of me. I looked at the shadow and I felt spooked.

Sweat that had been running down the back of my neck and under my arms seemed suddenly to go cold on me.

A man was standing out of my sight and the moonlight had cast his shadow in such a way I could see it without seeing him.

The shadow was a sinister caricature of the man. It made him seem tremendously tall with enormous shoulders. The slouch hat seemed absurdly small in comparison with the vast shoulders and his wide trousers looked like sails. He stood motionless, his hands sunk into his coat pockets and his head thrust forward.

Very cautiously, I thumbed back the safety-catch on my gun. I watched the motionless shadow for several minutes, but it didn't move. I guessed whoever it was round the corner knew I was waiting for him and he had made up his mind not to make the first move.

The sound of Marian's heels had died away. There was a hot, stifling stillness in the night that added to my spookiness. Then suddenly a woman laughed hysterically. The high-pitched, almost idiotic sound came from above my head. I took a step back and glanced quickly up.

On the fourth floor of a nearby house one solitary window blazed light into the street. As I looked, a hot wind suddenly blew up and the dirty curtains hanging outside the window flapped convulsively like the flounderings of a dying fish.

The woman laughed again and then the sound died away in a whimpering gurgle. A moment later she began to weep.

I looked once more at the corner of the street and down at the brick pavement. The shadow had gone. No other sound came to me except the harsh, bitter sobbing from the woman and the flapping of the curtain in the wind.

I drew my gun and edged towards the corner. Taking off my hat, I peered round the wall into the street beyond. There was no sign of the man who had been following us. The street was empty but for a stringy-looking cat that bolted into the shadows at the sight of me.

I took out my handkerchief and wiped my face. Then I laughed softly. "All right," I said to myself, "that made you as jittery as hell." I tucked my handkerchief away, thinking that a few more nights like this and I'd be ready for the nut house.

I looked up and down the street, made certain that there was no one around, then in spite of the heat, I ran after Marian. She was waiting for me at the next corner and when she saw me coining, she moved quickly towards me.

“Phew!” she said, grasping my arm. “I was scared something was going to happen. Did you see anyone?”

“No, except a cat that looked like it could do with a meal,” I returned, smiling at her. “And you don’t have to be scared of cats.”

“I was scared,” she confessed. “I must be getting nervy or something. But I was sure that man was following us.”

I spotted a cab crawling down the street and I waved. “We’ll drive back and you can get yourself a good night’s rest. You’ll feel fine in the morning.”

When we had got into the cab, she said: “You wouldn’t be lying, would you?”

I patted her hand. “Not to you,” I assured her. “There just wasn’t anyone around.”

“I don’t understand it,” she returned. “I don’t really. When. I saw that man duck out of sight, I felt my flesh creep. I’ve never felt that way before.”

Every few seconds as the cab whizzed past a street light I caught a fleeting glimpse of her face. She looked white and tired and her finely pencilled eyebrows were knitted in a frown.

“Forget it,” I said. “There wasn’t anyone there. You’re letting your imagination play you tricks.”

“I wonder why you took me out tonight,” she said unexpectedly.

“I told you. I was lonely, you were lonely, and Cranville’s pretty grim town. You’re not sorry, are you?”

“Sorry?” She shook her head. “I’ve had one of the nicest evenings of my life. Only I wish I hadn’t been so silly just now.” She sat up and swivelled round so that she was facing me. “What’s the matter with this town? When I got off the train I felt . . .” She stopped and then went on: “Oh, never mind, I guess the heat has made me nervy.”

“What did you feel?” I asked, taking her slim hand in mine.

“I felt scared. There’s something about this place that makes me nervous. It’s so hard and dirty and cold. There’s a queer kind of ‘frightened atmosphere about the people. Have you noticed it, or am I

just imagining it?”

“It’s dirty and hard and cold all right,” I said, being purposely casual. “But that needn’t scare you—”

“You weren’t kidding about the girls who’ve disappeared?” she broke in. “I mean you really are going to try and find them?”

“Sure, but that’s nothing to do with the town. Girls disappear in any town. Why have you suddenly thought about them?”

“I don’t know. Oh, I guess I’m tired. I’ll be all right in the morning.”

While she was speaking the cab drew up outside the hotel. “That’s the idea,” I said, helping her out. “Now you get off to bed.”

I paid the driver and followed her up the steps and across the verandah.

Two dim figures sat in rocking chairs on the verandah. I saw them glance in my direction, but I thought nothing of it. I strolled across the lobby to the desk.

“Good evening,” the clerk said, looking at Marian and then at me. His sallow face showed his disapproval. “Two gentlemen are waiting to see you.”

“Waiting to see me?” I repeated.

He nodded. “They’re out on the verandah.”

“Thanks,” I said, and turned to Marian, who was watching me with a worried look in her eyes. “You go on up and get some sleep,” I said. “It’s been a swell evening.”

“Thanks a lot,” she said. “I enjoyed it too.” She hesitated, then turned to the stairs.

I called “Good night” after her and then turned back to the clerk. “Who are these fellows?” I asked, lighting a cigarette and giving him a hard look.

“One of them is Mr. McArthur,” he returned indifferently. “I didn’t see the other one.”

McArthur! That could only mean one thing. He had thought over what I had said, given his wife the slip and was ready to talk. “Okay,” I

said, "I'll see them," and I walked out onto the verandah.

McArthur peered at me and got hastily to his feet. "Mr. Spewack?" he said cautiously. "Yes, I see it is. Mr. Spewack, I want to apologize "

"Forget it," I said, hooking one of the rocking chairs towards me with my foot. "If you want my help you can have it."

The other figure stood up and came into the light. He was young, slight and a few inches shorter than me. His suit was well cut but worn carelessly. His necktie had worked round until it was nearly natter-his right ear.

"This is Ted Esslinger," McArthur said in a low voice. "I've talked things over with him and we've decided to see you."

"You Max Esslinger's son?" I said, looking at him with sudden interest.

"I am," he said, offering his hand.

I stared at him. He had a fine head. His black wavy hair was taken straight back and his face was pale, sensitive and pleasant.

I shook hands rather blankly and looked at McArthur for a lead.

But it was Ted Esslinger who took charge. "Mr. Spewack," he said, keeping his voice down, "you can appreciate I'm in an embarrassing position. Is there any place we can go where we can talk without interruption?"

I remembered the man in the room next to mine and shook my head. "Not in my room," I said. "Suggest some place and I'll come with you."

Ted looked at McArthur and then shrugged. "I've got my car," he said. "We can talk as I drive."

"That suits me," I said, and followed him down the steps of the hotel.

We crossed the street to where a Pontiac convertible stood in the shadows.

Ted opened the door and slid under the steering wheel.

I glanced back over my shoulder at the hotel. The blinds of all the windows were drawn, except one on the third floor. I could see the outline of a man standing looking down into the street. He was framed

in the window, and as I looked up at him he jerked back out of sight. I noticed three things. He was looking from a window that was next to mine. He wore a slouch hat and he had very wide shoulders.

I climbed into the Pontiac and slammed the door.

As we drove away from the hotel I felt suddenly spooked. But I kept it to myself.

Outside the city's limits Ted Esslinger slowed down and pulled over to the shoulder of the road. He parked under trees and, relaxing down in his seat, said: "We're all right here."

None of us had spoken during the drive out of town.

MacArthur, sitting in the rear seat, leaned forward and began to breathe heavily down the back of my neck. I could tell by his restless movements that he was worried and jumpy.

I lit a cigarette, flipped the match out of the open window and waited. There was a long pause and I shot a side-look at Esslinger. He was staring into the darkness of the trees. In the moonlight he looked young. He couldn't have been more than twenty-three, and I could see he was also a little jumpy.

"You're our only hope," he said suddenly in a low voice. "That's why we've come to you."

I didn't say anything.

He looked back over his shoulder at MacArthur. "You're not to tell anyone about this, Mac," he went on. "Father would be furious if he knew that I..."

MacArthur wheezed excitedly. "You go ahead," he broke in. "I'm not saying anything."

I let them frighten each other. I wasn't going to make it easy for them. They had come to me and it was up to them to put their cards on the table.

Ted Esslinger turned his head so he could look at me. "I want you to know I'm not taking sides in this business," he said, his hands fiddling with the steering wheel. "You may be working for Wolf against my father, but I can't help that. I'm sure if anyone can find these girls you can, and that's all I'm interested in."

“What makes it so important to you?” I asked, looking at him inquiringly.

“Luce was a pal of mine. I went to school with Vera. Joy and I kept a regular date each week. I knew them well and I liked them. They were good kids.” He drew a deep breath, then blurted out: “At the rate we’re going now, they never will be found.”

I grunted. “So they were your pals?” I said, underlying ‘pals’.

His face tightened. “I know what you’re thinking,” he said, half in anger, “but there was nothing like that. They were decent girls. Just ordinary kids who liked a good time. I and the rest of the-boys in Cranville kicked around with them, but nothing else.”

I looked back at McArthur. His skinny, yellow face showed his misery. “He’s right, mister,” he said. “There was nothing wrong with the girls.”

“Okay, okay,” I said, shrugging. “What makes you think they’ll never be found?”

Esslinger’s knuckles showed white as his grip tightened on the steering wheel. “It’s a political set-up.” There was bitterness in his voice. “No one cares a damn what’s happened to them. The police aren’t doing anything. As long as no one finds these kids, Macey’s sitting pretty. The election is in the bag, anyway. Starkey’s planning to strong-arm the voters. His gang will control the polls. It’s easy enough. All they have to do——”

“I know,” I broke in; “don’t let’s waste time. I’m tired. What do you want me to do?”

“But I want you to understand the set-up,” he protested. “You see, if these girls aren’t found, it won’t make any difference to Starkey, but it will to Wolf and my father. They’ve guaranteed to find the girls. It’s in Macey’s interests now for them not to be found.”

“Can you believe people could be so wicked?” McArthur said, punching the back of my seat.

“So the police aren’t working on the case?” I said, jerking my hat lower over my eyes. “How about the investigator your father’s hired?”

Ted made an impatient movement with his hands. “Audrey? I can’t think what father’s doing. He’s crazy to expect Audrey Sheridan to do

anything. She's a good kid. I've known her all my life, but against Macey and Starkey she's helpless. Besides, she's never had any experience of this kind of thing."

I let smoke drift down my nostrils. "She's a licensed operative, isn't she?" I said. "Why did your father hire her if she's that bad?"

Ted lifted his square shoulders helplessly. "I don't know," he said. "I wish I did. He must know she won't get anywhere."

"It's no good, Ted," McArthur said. "We've got to tell him the truth." He leaned forward so I could see his troubled face. "Everyone likes Audrey," he went on to me. "Ted's father thinks by hiring her he'll ride along on her popularity. He figures if she doesn't find the girls they won't blame him so much."

"That sickens me," Ted burst out. "Even my father isn't worrying about the girls. All he thinks about is the election. Can't you understand how I feel? It's driving me crazy. My father won't listen to me. When Mac told me he'd seen you, I knew you were our only hope. I don't give a damn who becomes mayor, but these kids must be found!"

"If they're anywhere around, I'll find them," I promised. "But I want help. There's too much opposition in this town to please me. What do you think's happened to them?"

"I can make a guess," he said. "Mac doesn't agree with my ideas, but I'm pretty sure I'm right."

"Look," I said patiently, "I said I was tired, didn't I? Well, spill it, if you've got anything to spill, and let me get to bed."

"I think the whole business is a frame-up to discredit my father and Wolf. I'll bet even money Starkey's kidnapped the girls, knowing father and Wolf will lose votes by it."

"Guessing won't help. Have you any proof?"

"There's something that might help. I told Audrey about it, but she got nowhere with it."

I pulled down a lungful of smoke and waited.

"The day before Luce disappeared she told me a street photographer had taken her photo, She was going to collect the photograph on the

day she disappeared. The shop where she was to collect the photograph is owned by Starkey. It's one of his sidelines."

I thought about this. At face value it didn't seem much, but I was interested.

"You think that was where she was kidnapped?"

He nodded. "That's how I worked it out."

"You don't know if the other girls were photographed in the same way? If they were, there might be something in it." Then I remembered the three photographs Dixon had shown me and I sat up abruptly. The photographs had all been taken on the street, showing the girls' heads and shoulders with buildings as a background. "They were all photographed like that!" I said, getting excited. "The Camille Gazette has photos of all three girls and they were all taken on the street."

McArthur sucked his teeth. "I told you this guy could help. knew it as soon as I saw him."

Ted stared at me. "Then Starkey must be at the bottom of it," he said grimly.

"What are we going to do about it?"

"I'll take care of it," I said. "Is there anything else?"

They looked at each other and decided there wasn't anything else. That was all right with me. They hadn't wasted my time. I had something useful to work on.

"We want to be in on this, Mr. Spewack," Ted said anxiously. "You won't leave us out?"

"I'm working for Wolf," I reminded him, "but if you want these girls found, you give me all the information you have." I glanced at my watch. It was just after eleven. "Do you know where the photographs are collected?"

"It's a shop called the Street-Camera and it's halfway down Murray Street."

"Okay." I lit another cigarette. "We'll go back now. Where can I get you if I want you?"

He scribbled a telephone number on the back of an old envelope and gave it to rue. "You'll be careful, won't you?" he said. "My father will be mad."

"Don't worry," I said. "I'll take care of that."

He started the engine and then he said: "I hope your wife won't be worried about you."

"My wife?" I said, surprised. "I haven't a wife."

"I'm sorry." He sounded embarrassed. "I thought the lady you were with . . ."

I laughed. "She's not my wife," I returned. "I only met her tonight. We were lonely, so I took her out to dinner."

"I see." He still seemed embarrassed. "I thought I hadn't seen her before. She's very beautiful, isn't she?"

I grunted. "Drop around one of these days. I'll introduce you. She could do with a little company."

"I most certainly will," he said, brightening, and, engaging gear, drove back the way we had come.

* * *

I walked into the lobby of the hotel and glanced around. The place was empty except for a girl who sat behind the reception desk. She was chewing gum and reading a movie magazine. She didn't look up until I reached the desk.

"Good evening," I said.

She shot me an interested look and then reached for my key. "367?" she said.

"Right first time." I took the key from her.

She was small, dark and nicely built. She had a red, pouting mouth and big, sulky eyes.

“Do you go with the hotel or are you hired by the hour?” I said, leaning on the desk and admiring her figure.

“Whichever way it is, it wouldn’t mean anything to you,” she said, touching her black curls with plump little fingers.

“It might,” I said. “I go for sophisticated dames in a big way.”

She chewed thoughtfully and then lifted her shoulders. “Don’t waste your time on me,” she said. “When I prospect for gold I use a dredger.”

I took out a roll of notes and showed it to her. “I light cigars with this stuff,” I said carelessly. “I keep my spending money in the bank.”

Her eyes popped a little and she became more friendly.

“Maybe we could call on your bank one day,” she said.

“Sure, any day you like,” I returned, and feeling I had gained her interest, I went on: “Tell me, who’s the guy in 369?”

“369’s empty,” she returned. “Why?”

“Did I say 369?” I shook my head. “That’s the third mistake I’ve made today. I meant 365.”

Her eyes became calculating. “I can’t tell you things like that,” she said, resting her cheek on her hand. “This is a respectable hotel.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” I took out my roll and pulled off a five-dollar note. I put my roll back and laid the five-spot on the desk. “Who did you say was in 365?”

Her hand whipped the note out of sight so fast I could scarcely follow the movement. “A guy called Jeff Gordan.”

“Jeff Gordan,” I repeated, smiling at her. “Isn’t he one of Starkey’s boys?”

Her face froze and her eyes became sulky again. “I wouldn’t know,” she said, and turned back to her magazine.

I said good night and went upstairs.

In my room, I hung my hat on a peg on the door and walked over to the bureau. I walked heavily so the guy next door would know I was

back. I poured myself a large whisky and sat down.

For my first day I hadn't done so badly. It looked like these three girls had been kidnapped. That was a tough break for them. It meant they were either dead by now or when the election was tied up they'd most certainly be knocked off.

Starkey wouldn't let them loose to talk. A kidnapping rap was hard to beat these days.

It looked like the whole set-up revolved around Starkey. Max Esslinger was just a third-rate politician trying to make the grade. He was like all third-rate politicians. As long as he was elected, he wouldn't care who suffered.

Wolf was different. He was making an effort to find the girls. But even then, he was doing it not because he cared a damn what happened to them, but because he had to put on an act to beat Starkey and Esslinger.

I drank some whisky and thought about Ted Esslinger. At least he was sincere, and I liked him for that. He was ready to throw his father down if it meant finding the girls.

The Street-Camera idea was interesting. I'd have to look into that. It was a neat, way of trapping a girl who'd been singled out for kidnapping. I wondered if the girls had been killed right away or whether they'd been hustled into a car at the back of the shop and taken away.

Then I remembered that a shoe belonging to one of the missing girls had been found in an empty house. It could have been a plant to switch the inquiry away from the Street-Camera shop. I decided that it had to be a plant. Otherwise it didn't make sense.

I drank some more whisky and eyed the wall opposite. I was pretty sure this Jeff Gordan was the guy who'd been tailing Marian and me.

I got up, put the glass of whisky on the bureau and stared at the wall thoughtfully. It would be an idea, I reasoned, to find out what it was all about.

I left my room and knocked on the door of 365.

A man's voice said: "Who is it?"

"The room clerk." I kept my voice down.

The door opened a foot. I put my shoulder against it and shoved. A big, apish-looking man started back, off balance. He stared at me in startled surprise.

He wasn't the kind of party you'd want to meet up a dark alley. He was bow-legged and the length and thickness of his arms and the flatness of his face reminded me of an orangutan.

I wasn't sure, now that I was face to face with him, if he was the guy who had followed us.

He eyed me narrowly.

"What's the idea?"

"That's what I came to see you about," I said, closing the door and leaning against it.

"What do you want?"

"You've been tailing me," I said. "Why?"

He shifted his eyes to the floor and then back to me. "I haven't been following anyone," he snarled.

"Nuts," I said, smiling at him. "And you've been writing me notes."

He shook his head woodenly. All the time I was speaking he was ready to start something if I made a move. I could tell that by the way he held his long arms loosely at his side. "If you don't get out I'll call the operator," he threatened.

I pretended to be convinced. "Maybe I made a mistake," I said, "but you look like the guy who's been tailing me."

He began to relax. "I can't help that," he said. "Why the hell should I want to tail you, anyway?"

"That's what I wanted to find out," I said. "Well, I'm sorry to have disturbed you." I turned to go. There was a phone book on the dresser, and as I passed I picked it up and slung it at him all in one movement.

The book caught him on the side of his head and he reeled back. Before he could recover his balance I jumped him.

My fist sank into the side of his neck and he went down. I let him sit up and then I kicked his face. The kick stunned him. He lay flat on his back, the whites of his eyes showing and breath bubbling out of his open mouth.

I knelt at his side and started to go through his pockets. I found nothing of interest in his trouser pockets, and I was beginning on his coat when he came to.

He swung at me, but I saw it coming and dropped flat on top of him. I socked him twice in the belly before he threw me off. He was strong all right, and I slammed against the wall. Before he had time to get to his feet I dived at him. He kicked my stomach with both feet. I hit hard on the floor, most of my breath knocked out of me.

He scrambled up, his flat face alight with vicious fury. I couldn't move. My muscles had gone back on me and I wanted to vomit.

As he came at me I pulled my gun and showed it to him.

He stopped suddenly like he had run up against a brick wall.

I struggled to get my breath and fought down the sickness, but I didn't lower the gun or take my eyes off him.

He stood watching me sullenly.

"Sit on the bed," I managed to jerk out at last.

He sat on the bed, his hands on his knees, glaring at me.

I remained on the floor for three or four minutes until I got my wind back, then, still watching him, I climbed to my feet. My legs felt shaky and I had to lean against the wall.

"Now we'll talk, you louse," I said, keeping the gun pointed at his face.

He just snarled at me.

"You're one of Starkey's boys, aren't you?"

He shifted his eyes and I knew I'd guessed right.

Keeping him covered, I took out the note that had been pushed under my door and let him see it.

I laughed. "You don't think chat, kid's stuff scared me, do you?"

He looked at his feet and shifted restlessly.

I gave him time to say something and then went on: "I don't like guys following me around. It makes me nervous. When I get nervous my heater's likely to go off. Tell Starkey that. While you're at it, tell him I don't think he'll be mayor, and you might add I'll be along to see him tomorrow."

He stared at me, his small eyes blank with surprise.

I nodded to the door. "And now dust. Get the hell out of here and stay out. I'll see you around here again, or tagging along behind me, I'll slap you down so hard you'll bounce for a week."

He stood up, picked up a slouch hat that was lying on a chair nearby, and put it on his head. I knew when I saw him in that hat, that he was the party who'd been tailing us.

"Beat it," I said.

He went to the door, opened it and then turned to look at me. His eyes were glassy with hate.

"You small-town toughs are a dime a dozen," I said. "Scram!"

He spat on the floor by my feet and went out. I followed him into the passage and watched him walk stiff-legged to the stairs. He didn't look back.

I awoke with a start. For a brief moment I had the fuddled idea I was in my New York apartment, but the white bureau I could see in the moonlight put me right. I was still in the Eastern Hotel, Cranville.

There was a continuous, gentle tapping on my door. It was a furtive sound. It could have been a rat gnawing on wood. But I knew it wasn't. I groped for the lamp by my bed and turned it on. Then I sat up and ran my fingers through my hair.

I felt like hell.

The urgent tapping continued.

I glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was ten minutes past two. My eyelids weighed a ton and the room was stifling, although I had drawn back the curtains and opened the windows wide before going

to bed.

I slipped out of bed, grabbed my dressing gown and reached for the .38 which was under my pillow.

The tapping went on all the time I was shaking the sleep out of my brain and getting fixed. Whoever wanted me was making sure no one else would be disturbed.

I went to the door. "Who is it?" I said, speaking against the panel.

The tapping stopped. "It's Esslingen" I recognized his voice. I turned the key and opened up.

Ted Esslinger came in quickly and closed the door, His necktie was still under his right ear, and his face was white and pinched.

I gave him a hard look, went back to the bed and sat down. I shoved the gun under the pillow and massaged the back of my neck.

"For the love of Mike," I said, "can't you let me sleep?"

"Mary Drake hasn't been home," he said. His teeth chattered with nerves.

I yawned, stretched, and went on massaging the back of my neck. "Another of your pals?"

"Don't you understand?" he said, speaking in a low, tense voice.

"She went to work this morning and she hasn't come back. Drake's over with my father now."

"Aw, hell," I said, leaning back on my elbows. "What can I do about it? I don't work twenty-four hours a day."

He began to pace up and down. "Something's happened to her," he said, driving his fist into the palm of his hand. "As soon as Drake came around, I slipped out to tell you. No one else knows but Drake and father. You must do something."

I was beginning to feel better. "When was she last seen?" I asked, stifling a yawn.

"She left her office at five o'clock and she was going on to a dance. Roger Kirk, the boy she was meeting, says she didn't show up. He thought she wasn't well, so he went home. It was only when Drake

phoned him at eleven o'clock that we began to think something was wrong."

I fumbled in my coat pocket, found a packet of Lucky Strike and shook a couple onto the quilt. "Have a smoke and sit down," I said, lighting up.

He sat down but he wouldn't smoke.

I brooded for a minute or so while he watched me anxiously. Then I said: "Has Drake told the cops?"

"Not yet. He came to father because he thought—"

"I bet he did," I broke in. "What's your father done?"

"Nothing yet," he said. "He won't do anything until the morning. That's why I came here. We've at least seven hours' start over any of them."

"Yeah," I said without much enthusiasm, "but there isn't much we can do." I flicked ash on the floor, stifled another yawn and went on: "You know the girl?"

He nodded. "She was a friend of Luce McArthur," he told me. "Roger Kirk and I went to the same school. We four used to go out together."

I got up and wandered over to the chair where I had dumped my clothes. It took me three minutes to dress and then I went into the bathroom to sponge my face and fix my hair. I came back into the bedroom and poured myself a small Scotch.

"Drink?" I said, waving the bottle at him.

He shook his head. "What are you going to do?" His eyes were bright with speculation.

"I'm playing a hunch," I said soberly. "I bet it's a no-good hunch, but I'll take a chance. How far is this Street-Camera joint?"

He drew in a sharp breath. "On Murray Street. About five minutes in the car."

"Have you got the car?"

"It's outside."

“Okay, let’s go.” I picked up my hat, yawned some more and turned to the door. “This is a hell of a game for sleep,” I said, moving out into the passage “Don’t you ever take it up as a profession.”

As he followed me out of the room, Marian French’s door opened and she propped herself up against the doorpost. “Sleep-walking?” she asked, with reasonable curiosity.

She looked hot in the powder-blue silk wrap she was wearing. Her long, silky fair hair hung to her shoulders and her face was flushed and sleepy.

“Hullo, there,” I said in a whisper; “if you listen hard enough in a minute or so you’ll hear the day break. I’m the guy who breaks it.”

She glanced at Ted Esslinger and then back at me. “Is he your assistant?” she asked, trying not to gape.

“Miss French, meet Mr. Ted Esslinger,” I said, waving my hands. “Now will you be a nice girl and go back to bed? Mr. Esslinger and I are going on a practice run.”

“Has something happened?” she asked, first smiling at Esslinger and then turning back to me.

I shook my head. “I do this sort of thing every day of my life. It keeps me fit.” I tipped my bat at her and jerked my head at Esslinger. “Let’s go,” I said.

He gave Marian a quick, shy smile and followed me downstairs. I heard Marian heave an exasperated sigh and then her door closed.

“Nice, isn’t she?” I said, walking as quietly as I could.

“Yes,” he said, “but this isn’t the time—”

“Don’t kid yourself,” I returned, entering the lobby, “Any time’s right with me.”

The night clerk, a fat little man with a heavy moustache, stared at us blankly, but I didn’t stop. I crossed the lobby and the verandah and got into the Pontiac that was standing at the kerb.

Esslinger ran around and slid under the steering wheel.

“Make it snappy,” I said, huddling down into my seat. “I want some sleep sometime tonight.”

He drove fast. There was no traffic around and we had the streets to ourselves.

“What do you expect to find?” he asked, as he turned into Main Street.

“I don’t know,” I returned, lighting a cigarette. “It’s just an idea I’ve got at the back of my mind. I’m willing to bet there’s nothing to it.”

He gave me a quick glance, shrugged and drove on. We didn’t say anything until we reached Murray Street.

He slowed down and peered out of the window. “It’s somewhere along here,” he muttered.

I made no attempt to help him. It was his town and it was up to him to find the place. He swung into the kerb suddenly and stopped the car.

“This is it,” he said.

I got out of the car and looked at the small plate-glass window that was stacked with photographs. I stepped back to read the sign overhead. It was picked out in heavy chromium lettering that glittered in the moonlight: “The Street-Camera.” This was the joint all right.

I took a flashlight from my hip pocket and threw the beam on the window.

Ted was standing at my side. “What’s the idea?” he said, following the beam as I worked it over the postcard-sized photographs pinned to the back of the window, the sides, and on a sloping board on the floor of the window.

“See anyone you know?” I said, keeping the light moving.

He got it then. “You don’t think he began,” but I shushed him.

Right bang in the middle of the sloping board was a photograph of a blonde girl who laughed up at me. The background of Main Street showed behind her head. The photograph was four times the size of any of the other photographs in the window. Underneath it was a small notice. Special enlargements \$1.50 extra.

“That her?” I said to Esslinger.

“Yes.” He was holding onto my arm and shivering.

“When I get a hunch I play it right on the nose,” I said, snapping off the flashlight.

“You know what this means,” Esslinger said unsteadily. “They have been kidnapped, and kidnapped from here. Mary might even be hare still.”

I walked round him to the shop door. It was of plate glass and chromium.

The only way to force an entrance would be to smash the window and I didn’t want to do that. It would make too much noise, “Can we get in around the back?” I asked.

“Get in?” he repeated. His face told me he was scared. “You’re not going to. . .?”

“Sure, but you’re not in this,” I said. “You get off home.”

He hesitated, then said stubbornly: “If you’re going in, I’m coming with you.”

“Forget it,” I said sharply. “I’m paid to stick my neck out. If we get caught, your father’ll know you’re helping me. I don’t want it that way. You’re useful to me as long as no one knows what you’re doing. You’ve done enough already. Get off home and leave this to me.”

He hesitated, then nodded his head. “I guess you’re right,” he said reluctantly. “They don’t even know I’m out. Do you want the car?”

“I could use it,” I said, “but someone might recognize it. No, you take it and get off.”

“I don’t like leaving you . . .” he began, but I wasn’t going to spend the rest of the night arguing with him.

“Be a good guy and beat it,” I said, and leaving him by the car I walked off down the street. A hundred yards further on I came to an alley. As I peered into the darkness, wondering if it led to the back of the building, I heard his engine start up and then the Pontiac swept past at high speed. I watched the tail light disappear before I entered the alley.

I was relieved to see him go. An amateur at this game could easily step out of turn, and I wasn’t looking for trouble. I liked to work alone. If anything went wrong I had only myself to blame.

The alley was narrow and smelly. It brought me eventually to the back of the Street-Camera building. The place was in darkness. The back door didn't seem particularly strong, so I put my shoulder against it and shoved. It creaked. I shoved again hard. There was a snapping sound and the door swung open. I stepped back and listened. The building and alley remained silent. Shielding my flashlight with my hand, I peered through the open doorway and then stepped into a narrow passage. Ahead of me was a door leading to the shop. Another door on my right was half-open.

I went down the passage and opened the door leading to the shop. There was no blind to the window, but the moon gave enough light for me to see. I had a quick look around, saw nothing to excite me and stepped back into the passage again. I didn't want any passing cop to spot me through the window.

I retraced my steps and pushed open the other door. I entered a large room which obviously was used as a workshop. The floor was littered with strips of paper from trimmed photographs. Mounts and photographs were piled high on the two tables in the centre of the room. I let the beam of my flashlight crawl around the room and over the floor. I examined the fireplace, which was full of burnt paper, but I found nothing to connect the place with the missing girls.

I pushed my hat to the back of my head and scowled out of the window. I had no idea what I was looking for, but I had hoped for something better than this.

I went to the back door and glanced into the alley. It wouldn't be possible to park a car out there. That puzzled me. I couldn't make out how the girls were taken from the shop, if they had been kidnapped from this building.

As I stood brooding about this I heard a car coming at high speed. A moment later there was a squeal of brakes as the car slid to a standstill. I stepped quickly into the passage and closed the door. Moving fast, I reached the door that led into the shop and opened it a few inches.

I could see the street through the shop window. A big tourer stood outside the shop, and as I watched three men spilled from it. One stood by the car looking up and down the street. The other two crossed the sidewalk and one of them pushed a key into the shop door lock and snapped it back.

It happened so quickly had no chance to duck back along the passage. I pulled the door to and waited, my hand on my gun.

I heard the two men enter the shop.

“Snap into it,” one of them said. “The patrol’ll be around in five minutes.”

His voice was harsh and I could hear him breathing heavily.

“Okay, keep your shirt on,” the other said hoarsely. “Give me that picture over there.”

I heard something heavy drop on the floor and I opened the door a few inches, but I couldn’t see what was going on.

“I can’t reach the damn thing,” the man with the hoarse voice said. “Watch what you’re doing, you dope,” the harsh-voiced man snarled. “You’ll wreck the whole display.”

There were more mutterings and then the harsh-voiced man said: “Okay. Let’s get outa here.”

I heard them cross the shop, open the door and lock it behind them. I peered cautiously into the shop. They were climbing into the tourer. I couldn’t see what they looked like, except they were all big and broad-shouldered. One of them might have been Jeff Gordan, but I couldn’t be sure.

The tourer drove away fast.

If the police patrol was due in five minutes, it was time for me to get out of here. I took a quick look round the shop, but there was nothing to show what the men had been doing. Then I went back down the passage towards the back door.

As I was opening the door, something caught my eye. I turned the beam of my flashlight on the floor. A once-white crumpled handkerchief was lying almost at my feet. I picked it up. It was a small, lace-edged handkerchief with the initials M.D. worked in one of its corners.

I stepped into the alley, closed the back door and walked swiftly to the street.

To me the initials M.D. could mean only one thing. The handkerchief

belonged to Mary Drake! With that and the four pictures of the missing girls as evidence of kidnapping, I could start trouble for Macey if he wouldn't cooperate with me. Kidnapping was a Federal offence and the F.B.I. would act on this kind of evidence.

I slipped the handkerchief in my pocket and stepped cautiously from the alley into the street. There was no one around and I went back to the shop window.

The moon was now immediately overhead. I could clearly see the details of every photograph in the window. But there was only one photograph that interested me, the one that carried the caption: Special enlargements \$1.50 extra.

One look was enough. I knew then why the three men had driven up to the shop and had entered in such haste. The photograph had been changed. The blonde girl whom Esslinger had told me was Mary Drake no longer laughed up at me. A photograph of a sharp-featured girl wearing a white floppy hat had taken her place.

As I stared blankly at the photograph, the girl seemed to sneer at me.

I reached the Granville Gazette building as a street clock struck three.

As I walked along the sidewalk in the brilliant moonlight I felt as exposed as a nudist let loose in a subway. The air was still stifling and I was sweating and jumpy.

I wandered past the dilapidated building, glanced casually at the double doors and noticed they were closed. I didn't stop, but went on for twenty yards before ducking into a doorway.

It was going to be a sweet job to force that lock in a street that was almost as light as day. It only needed one conscientious cop to poke his head round the corner while I was doing it and I'd be in a nice jam. From what I had seen of the Cranville cops he'd shoot first and ask questions after.

I stood in the doorway and listened. It was quiet, and I was just making up my mind to get to work when I heard someone coming. I dodged back into the doorway and told myself what a smart guy I was not to have been caught in the open.

A woman came down the street. I could tell it was a woman by the click of her wooden heels on the brick pavement. She was walking quickly, then she slowed down, and a moment later the clicking of her

heels stopped altogether.

I took off my hat and peered round the doorway. I caught a glimpse of her.

She was standing outside the Cranville Gazette building. I couldn't see much of her except she was slim, medium height, and seemed to be wearing a dark tailored suit.

She looked suddenly up and down the street. The movement was nervous and furtive. I ducked back out of sight, hoping she hadn't seen me.

She didn't run away, so after a few seconds I took another look. She was now standing close to the double doors. As I watched her, wondering what she was doing, I heard a faint sound of a lock turning. A moment later she pushed open the doors and disappeared into the building.

Automatically I fumbled for a cigarette, changed my mind and massaged the back of my neck instead. This had foxed me.

I gave her a couple of minutes and then walked to the building and tried the double doors. They were locked.

My brain was still a little fuddled with sleep and I felt as fresh as a ten-day corpse. I didn't know what to do. I was still gaping at the doors when I heard more footsteps. I had sense enough to move away from the Cranville Gazette building as a patrolman appeared from nowhere and stood staring at me.

"What do you think you're doing?" he said, swinging his nightstick and sticking out a jaw that looked like it had been hewn from rock.

I put on a drunk act and stumbled against him. "My pal," I said, patting his shoulder. "Stick around a li'l longer an' a beautiful big copper'll come along. Tha's what I said. Just stick around a little longer."

"I heard you the first time," he said, shoving me off. "On your way, bud, or I'll bend this club over your skull."

"Sure," I said, staggering back a couple of paces. "But I've gotta let the women and chil'n go first. I've gotta get the boat launched. I've gotta do something or other . . . now what the hell was it?" By that time I'd faded away and was zigzagging down the street.

I had to cover a lot of ground before I came to a side street. I reeled round the corner and then straightened up. I gave the cop a few minutes and then took a quick look. He was already on his way, and a moment later he turned off into Main Street.

Cursing softly, I ran back to the Granville Gazette building. I had wasted a good eight minutes, and if that cop ran into me again it would be highly inconvenient—for me.

I took out my pocketknife and with one of the hickies attached to it I tried to slip the lock back. My third attempt succeeded.

I looked quickly up and down the street, made sure no one had seen me, and pushed open the door. I moved into the small lobby, which smelt like a chicken run. I closed the door softly behind me.

I listened, but I didn't hear any sound of activity. I groped my way to the stairs and started up. It took me a long time to reach the fourth floor. I made no sound on the way up and I didn't like the absolute silence in the building. The woman couldn't have had time to leave. Maybe she was on the fifth or sixth floor, but I ought to have heard her moving about by now.

The Granville Gazette offices were at the end of the long passage. I didn't want to show a light and I knew my way, so I went forward in inky darkness.

Halfway down the passage I stopped. I wasn't sure, but I thought I saw something. I edged against the wall and looked hard into the darkness. The hairs moved on the back of my neck. There was something right ahead of me. My hand slid back and reached for my flashlight. My other hand went for my gun.

Then things happened so fast I was caught on the wrong foot. There was a quick movement, then someone brushed passed me.

My hand shot out and I caught an arm—a woman's arm. God knows what happened then. I felt her twist, come up violently against me and my arm was jerked forward. A hard little hip was rammed into my side and then my feet left the ground. I sailed through the air and came down with my head against the wall.

Nothing mattered for a while after that.

I came out of a red haze, my head expanding and contracting, and I up and cursed. The building was silent and I had no idea how long I

had been lying there. I fumbled for my flashlight and looked at my watch. It was three-forty. I must have been out for almost a quarter of an hour. The light hurt my eyes and I snapped it off. I didn't get up, as any movement sent pain stabbing through my head. I cursed some more. If I'd known I was going to run into a female jiu-jitsu expert I'd have stayed in bed. It set me back a long way to think a girl could have tossed me around like that. I thought I knew most of the Jap stuff, but that throw was the work of an expert.

I sat up slowly, wincing as pain throbbed in my head; but after a while it got better and I stood up. I felt like I'd been fed through a mangle. Limping over to the head of the stairs, I listened, but I heard nothing. She was halfway home by now.

Then I walked back to the Granville Gazette offices. The door was unlocked.

Somehow that didn't surprise me. I pushed the door open and snapped on my flashlight. The outer office looked as dreary as ever. I walked over to Dixon's office, listened, and then pushed the door open.

The beam of my flashlight fell on the battered deserted desk. I went over to it. The centre drawer was open. I expected that too. A quick look told me the three photographs of the missing girls Dixon had shown me only a few hours before were gone.

I stood staring down at the drawer, thinking. Of course the woman had got them. It wasn't going to be so easy now. With the photographs I could have called in the Federal Agents. I could have had Chief of Police Macey eating out of my hand. I wondered if she knew that.

My head began to ache and I wanted my bed. It was nu use sticking around 'this joint any longer. I wondered what Wolf would say if he knew I'd been tossed against a wall by a woman and had let her walk off with the only evidence I had as yet found in this case. I decided I wouldn't tell him.

As I turned to the door, I stopped short. Someone was sitting in the armchair by the window. All right, I jumped a foot, but who wouldn't? I even dropped the flashlight, and as I stooped to pick it up I felt sweat run from my face like a squeezed sponge.

"Who is it?" I said, putting my hand on my gun. My mouth was dry and I was as steady as tissue paper in a wind.

Silence hung in the room like a sodden blanket. I turned the beam of

my flashlight on to the chair. Dixon looked at me with blank glassy eyes. His livid violet-coloured face was set in a grimace of terror. Blood had oozed from his mouth and his tongue protruded like a strip of black leather.

I moved forward a pace and peered at him. Around his neck was a thin cord.

It bit into his neck and the folds of flesh half hid it.

Sitting in a huddled heap in the chair, his hands clenched in his last agony, he looked very lonely and very dead.

chapter three

I came out of the bathroom to find two men in my room.

One of them lolled against the door. The other sat on my bed.

The one against the door was a big man, rather paunchy, wearing a black and white striped suit. He would be about forty years of age.

Below his eyes across the top of his cheeks and the bridge of his nose there was a wide path of freckles. His mouth was tight and mean.

The one on the bed was short, fat and chunky. He had big shoulders and no peck. His face was red and puffy and his square jaw looked like it had been tacked on as an afterthought. A flat-crowned panama hat rested on the back of his head and his pale-grey suit was well cut and fitted him in spite of his bulges.

I looked at them, said "Hello," and propped myself up against the bathroom door. I had a feeling they didn't like me and nothing I could ever do would make them change their minds.

The man on the bed eyed me without interest. He put a fat white hand inside coat and took out a cigar. He lit it with care and tossed the match on the carpet.

"Who let you two in?" I said. "I may be living in a hotel, but my bedroom isn't a lobby."

"You Spewack?" The man on the bed pointed his cigar at me so I should know he was talking to me.

I nodded. "I was coming to see you this morning," I said, "but I overslept."

His eyes opened a trifle. "Know who I am?"

I nodded again. "Chief of Police Macey."

He looked across at the man at the door. "Hear that? He knows who I am." A half-wit child couldn't have missed the sneer in his voice.

The man at the door didn't say anything. He was unpeeling paper

from a package of chewing gum. He fed a strip of gum into his mouth and began to chew.

“So you were coming to see me—what about?” Macey asked, thrusting his square jaw at me and bullying me with his eyes.

“I’m a licensed investigator,” I told him. “I want cooperation.”

He looked at me fixedly and rolled his cigar wetly between his lips. “You do? Well, I ain’t interested. We don’t like private dicks. Do we, Beyfield?”

The man at the door agreed with him. “We hate ‘em,” he said. His voice sounded like it came from his ankles.

I shrugged and walked over to the dressing table. As I picked up a packet of Lucky Strike and shook out a cigarette, I glanced in the mirror.

Beyfield had sunk a hand in his coat pocket. It might have been his finger or a gun that he was pointing at me through the cloth of his coat.

“That’s too bad,” I said, lighting up. “But I still want cooperation.” I turned and leaned against the wall.

Macey picked his nose. “What sort of cooperation?” He wasn’t looking at me now, but down his feet. I noticed he was wearing buckskin shoes and powder-blue socks.

“Four girls have disappeared from this town and nothing’s been done about it,” I said; “I’ve been hired to find them.”

“Four girls?” His voice was soft, but his jowls and where his neck ought to have been turned red. “Who told you?”

“Never mind who told me,” I said. “I hear things. You’re going to get a pain where you won’t like it if something isn’t done.”

He touched off ash before saying: “Who told you about Mary Drake?”

“You don’t have to bother with that angle,” I returned, wandering over to the armchair and sitting down. “You’re not making a secret of it, are you? You’d better tell Starkey to lay off. He’s overplaying his hand.”

Macey’s mouth pursed and he raised his eyebrows at Beyfield. “Hear

that?" he said sourly.

"Maybe we'd better bounce him a little," Beyfield said. "The guy's hysterical."

"Don't give me that stuff," I said, looking from one to the other. "I've got enough evidence to stick the Feds on Starkey. How would you like that?"

Macey didn't seem to think much of the idea. "What evidence?"

I shook my head. "You're not acting like a policeman," I said, "and I don't trust you. Everything I've found I'm turning over to the Feds."

He blew smoke in a thick cloud at his feet, reached inside his coat and pulled a blunt-nosed automatic. He pointed it at me and said to Beyfield: "Take a look around."

Beyfield went through the room methodically. He didn't miss anything and he didn't make a mess. He put everything back as he found it. After ten minutes he was through.

I sat watching him. "Don't miss the bathroom," I said. He grunted and went into the bathroom.

"Smart guy, huh?" Macey's face was congested. "I could book you and make you talk."

"Wolf wouldn't like that," I returned. "Be your age, Macey. You can't afford to act the copper so long as you're backing Starkey. I'm not scared of you or of any of your boys. Take me down to headquarters and see where it gets you. Wolf would raise such a squawk the Governor would hear him."

Beyfield came out of the bathroom. He was still chewing placidly. "Nothing," he said, and went back to loll up against the wall.

Macey jerked his head at my suit that was lying on the chair. As he did so I remembered Mary Drake's handkerchief. If they found that I'd be in a hell of a jam. They might even try to pin the kidnapping on me.

"I've had enough of this," I said angrily. "You leave my personal things alone or come back with a warrant."

The automatic came up slowly so the barrel pointed right between my

eyes.

“At this distance,” Macey said, showing his yellow teeth, “I’m a pip of a shot. If you don’t believe it, start something and see where it gets you.”

Beyfield went through my suit with practised hands. I watched him with forced calm, but I didn’t feel so good. When he came to the pocket where I had put the handkerchief I had a hard time not to start something. I was so surprised when his hand came out empty that I nearly gave myself away.

“Finished?” I said, wanting to search the pocket myself. I knew he couldn’t have missed the handkerchief and that meant it was no longer in my pocket. It also meant that the female jiu-jitsu had got it, and that made me mad.

Beyfield worked his jaws around the gum before saying: “He’s bluffing.”

“Do you think I’m crazy enough to keep anything in this room?” I said. “Whatever I’ve got is somewhere safe. And now if you’ve finished, suppose we get down to business. What are you going to do about Mary Drake?”

Macey put the automatic away. He pulled at his underlip and stared at me thoughtfully. I could see he didn’t know what to make of me.

“We’re looking for her,” he said at last. “We’ll find her all in good time.”

“Luce McArthur disappeared a month ago,” I said. “You haven’t found her.”

Beyfield shifted restlessly, but Macey scowled at him. “A month’s not such a long time,” he said. “We’ll find ‘em all before long.”

“Starkey could find them today.”

“What makes you think that?”

“It sticks out a mile,” I told him. “He’s kidnapped them to put Wolf and Esslinger on the spot.”

He shook his head. “You’re wrong.” He chewed the butt of his cigar reflectively and added: “Starkey wouldn’t like that line from you.”

“He’s going to get it all the same,” I said, “unless you can suggest something better.”

“Me?” He looked almost hurt. “We’re working on it, but we don’t know nothing yet. These kids don’t amount to much. We’ll get around to ‘em when we’re ready.”

“Dixon says they were murdered,” I said, watching him. “Mass murder doesn’t sound so good.”

“He’s crazy. Besides, he’s dead.”

“Dead?” I repeated, acting surprised. “What do you mean—dead?”

He nodded his head. “Yeah,” he said. “Like I said—dead. I’ve known him years. He was crazy, but I got used to him.”

“But I was talking to him yesterday,” I said, sitting forward in my chair.

“You know how it is. Here today, gone tomorrow. He had a seizure or something. The doctor said his heart had been bad for years. Went suddenly. They found him this morning.”

“Who found him?”

“We did, didn’t we, Beyfield?”

Beyfield grunted.

“They couldn’t open the office and we were passing.” Macey touched off more ash, sighed and wagged his head. “He was working late last night. Must have popped off around two o’clock. That’s what the croaker said. Well, we’ve all got to go.”

“Yeah,” I said, “that’s true.” I sat staring at the floor. I wanted to get rid of these guys so I could turn things over in my mind. “I’ve got things to do,” I went on after a long pause. “If there isn’t anything else . . .”

Macey got to his feet. “We just looked in,” he said. “We don’t like private dicks, so we thought we’d tell you. Kind of let you know how you stand.”

“Sure,” I said, not moving.

“The sensible thing for you to do would be to take the first train out.

That'd be the sensible thing to do, wouldn't it, Beyfield?"

Beyfield grunted.

"And another thing," Macey said, at the door, "keep out of Starkey's way. He doesn't like private dicks either."

"I'm seeing Starkey this afternoon," I said, stubbing out my cigarette. "I want to tell him about the Federal Bureau of Investigation. It's a swell story, and it'll interest him."

"He doesn't like stories," Macey said, his lower lip jutting. "I'd beat it if I were you. My department can't give protection to private dicks. We're too busy."

Beyfield cleared his throat. "And a dummy like you'll need plenty of protection if you stick around," he told me in his basement voice. They went out and left me alone.

* * *

I wrote:

Dear Colonel Forsberg,

I saw Lewes Wolf yesterday. Briefly, the case boils down to this: Wolf, a retired industrial moneybag, for something better to do, plans to be elected mayor.

The opposition consists of the city mortician, Max Esslinger, and a gambler called Rube Starkey. Esslinger seems to be the people's choice, but Starkey has the support of the Chief of Police and probably the rest of the crackpots on the city's pay roll. In any case, it looks like a snap for Starkey, as he's going to strong-arm the polls when the election breaks.

Wolf is out in the cold but won't admit it. Three girls disappear. One is a daughter of a drugstore assistant, McArthur; the other, the daughter of a janitor, Dengate; and the third one is an orphan named Joy Kunz. The disappearances start trouble in the town—panic, excitement and window smashing, that sort of stuff.

Wolf engages us to find the girls. This because he's got money to burn

and hopes to gain favour with the voters. Esslinger, not to be out-done, engages the local Agency, run by Audrey Sheridan. The cops, knowing Starkey, whom they support and is going to be elected anyway, are not working on the case. They reckon if the girls aren't found it'll hurt Wolf and Esslinger's chances—they having guaranteed to find them.

That's the background of the case. The opposition is something to see. No one likes Wolf and consequently they don't like me. If I'm not careful someone's going to drop a rock weighing a ton on me. I called on McArthur but got chased away by his Wife. One of Starkey's boys tailed me and left me a threatening note.

Ted Esslinger, Max Esslinger's son, who knows all three girls, wants them found and never mind about the election. He came with McArthur last night to see me and offered help. His theory is that Starkey has kidnapped the girls to put Wolf and Esslinger on a spot. This may be an idea, although it doesn't quite check. Evidence points to it, but until I've had time to look around I'm not accepting it as the only angle. Briefly, the three girls were photographed by a street-cameraman and all were given tickets to collect the photographs. The place where the photographs are collected is run by Starkey. The girls went to this joint on the day they disappeared.

They could have been easily knocked off when they went to the shop, but I don't see how they were taken from the shop. If they have been killed, where are the bodies?

Things started last night. Another girl disappeared. Ted Esslinger tipped me off. Playing a hunch, I went to the Street-Camera joint and in the window was an enlarged picture of the missing girl, Mary Drake. Too smooth? That's what I think.

Almost like a plant. I got into the shop, and while I was looking around and not finding anything three of Starkey's men—I'm not sure they were Starkey's men, but it's an even bet they were—bust in, snatched the photograph, replaced it with another and beat it. As I was leaving I found a handkerchief with the initials M.D. in the passage by the back door. I'm pretty sure it wasn't there when I arrived. I may be wrong, but I don't think I could have missed it when I was looking around.

It could have been planted when I was in the shop. The whole set-up of the Street-Camera joint is too smooth. It may be a stunt by Wolf or Esslinger to discredit Starkey. Esslinger's most likely to be pulling it,

as his son tipped me off about the joint. Whether Ted is working with his father or is just a stooge, I don't know. He seems a decent kid, but I'm watching him. On the other hand, it may be Starkey's scheme to kidnap the girls. I haven't made up my mind yet.

Dixon, the editor of the "Granville Gazette," showed me three photos of the girls which were taken by the Street-Camera operative. I culled on Dixon as soon as I found what kind of opposition I was up against, but I only got one thing out of him before some guy phoned and told him to shut his mouth. He did say that Esslinger had no confidence in Audrey Sheridan to break the case. He was putting her on the job as window-dressing.

I went along to Dixon's place after finding the handkerchief. An unidentified woman had got there before me. I ran into her on her way out and she pulled a Jap trick on me. While I was out she took the handkerchief off me. Later I found Dixon had been knocked off. Someone had tied a cord too tightly around his neck. The three photographs had gone and he hadn't been dead more than ten minutes. The woman could have killed him and taken the photographs, but strangling with a cord isn't the way women kill. Although expert jiu-jitsu is a novelty too. The three photographs and the handkerchief were good enough evidence to set the F.B.I. working, but I haven't got them now. The woman might be Audrey Sheridan or she might be one of Starkey's molls. I don't know, but I'm going to find out. She certainly made a sucker out of me: This morning Chief of Police Macey and a stooge called. They acted tough, but it was a bad act. They thought I had something. Whether they thought I had the three photographs and the handkerchief I'm not sure, but they went through my room like they were looking for something important. I bluffed them into thinking I had something on Starkey, and if I'm to stay healthy I've got to keep them thinking along those lines.

They told me Dixon had clod of a heart attack. This might mean either of two things: (1) Starkey killed him to get the photographs and the police are covering him up, or (2) they don't want anything to interfere with or take the limelight off the fourth kidnapping. The murder of the town's editor would be bigger news than the disappearance of a working girl. Starkey and Macey want to create as much unrest in the town as possible.

Before long something's going to happen to bust the lid off this town. When that does happen a lot of people are going to get very tough indeed. I take it you 're charging Wolf danger money? I'd hate to be killed at our usual rates. I'd hate to be killed anyway. I'll let you know

what progress I make. If you've got a joss stick, move's the time to burn it. I want all the spiritual support I can get.

I was signing this when the telephone rang It was Ted Esslinger.

"Hullo there," I said.

"Did you find anything?" His voice sounded thin and far away.

"No, but that doesn't mean I won't." I wasn't sure, but I had a feeling someone was listening in. "Don't talk now," I went on, "I'll call you sometime today. There's one thing you can tell me. Is there a dame in this town who practises jiu-jitsu?"

"What?" His voice sounded startled. "What did you say?"

I repeated what I had said.

"Jiu-jitsu?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Why, yes. Audrey Sheridan used to do it. Her father taught her. But I don't know if she can do it now. Why do you ask that?"

"Never mind," I said, and hung up.

* * *

I walked across the fine green lawn and rang the bell in the brick portico under the peaked roof.

The same noiseless, sharp-eyed manservant came to the door.

"Good morning, sir," he said. "Mr. Wolf is in."

I followed him into the lobby.

"If you will wait a moment." He went on and walked off down the passage.

I could hear the tappity-tap-tap and the thin bell and muffled whir of Miss Wilson's typewriting coming through the closed door of her

office. There was a fresh, pleasant scent of flowers in the lobby. At the end of the passage double glass doors opened onto the garden.

The manservant came back. "This way, if you please," he said.

I followed him into Wolf's study.

He said, "Mr. Spewack, sir," softly, and closed the door behind me.

Wolf was sitting by the open window. His thin lips were clamped round a green dapple cigar. A small table at his side was covered with legal-looking documents and he was holding other papers in his fat hand.

"Have you found 'em?" he barked as soon as the door closed.

I pulled up a chair and sat down. "Let's get this straight," I said shortly. "You may be hiring me, but I don't have to take anything from you or anyone else."

He took the cigar out of his mouth and stared at me with hot and angry eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't act tough," I said, flicking my thumbnail under a package of Lucky Strike. "If you want me to work for you, treat me right." I took the cigarette that popped up from the package and set, fire to it.

He passed his hand over his close-cropped head. "God damn it," he said, "another girl's disappeared. What the hell do you think I'm paying you for?" But his tone was a shade milder.

"You're paying because you want the girls found. I can't stop them disappearing, but I can find them."

He put the papers he had in his hand on the table. "I don't want a lot of talk," he growled. "I told you to come here when you've found something."

"How bad do you want to be mayor?" I asked.

He gave me a hard look. "I told you. I'm going to be mayor. When I say a thing, it happens."

"Not with you sitting on your fanny all day," I said. "The other guys are up and doing. You want to get wise. This is going to be a battle."

“You thought of something?” There was eagerness in his voice.

“Who owns the Granville Gazette?”

“Elmer Shanks. Why?”

“What sort of a guy is he?”

“He’s an old fool. Worn out and useless,” Wolf growled. “Dixon runs the paper. He’s not much use either,”

“Would he sell?”

Wolf stared at me. Ash fell from his cigar and made a large splash of white on his coat. “Sell? Why the hell should he sell? He makes a living out of the paper and he leaves the headaches to Dixon. What are you talking about?”

“Dixon’s dead.”

Wolf went white and then red. “Dead?” he repeated. He looked suddenly old and a little idiotic.

“Don’t you read the papers? He died last night.” I struggled not very successfully with a yawn.

Wolf didn’t seem able to cope with the news. He sat staring at me, pulling at his beaky nose. I gave him time to recover and then went on: “The police say he died of heart failure, but he didn’t. He was murdered.”

Wolf flinched. “Murdered?”

I nodded.

“How do you know?”

“It’s my business to know things like that.”

He put the cigar in his mouth, chewed it, found it had gone out and mashed it in the ashtray at his side. His hand shook as he did this.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, he was murdered all right. Macey’s covering it up for his own reasons. I haven’t made a guess yet what they are.” I shifted forward in my chair. “With Dixon out of the way, you should be able to buy

the Gazette if you act fast.”

He turned this over in his mind. When he looked at me again I could see interest and doubt in his eyes.

“Why should I buy the Gazette?” he asked.

I snapped my fingers impatiently. “You told me when you left the mine you were crazy with boredom. Take over the Gazette and you’ve got a full-time job on your hands. If you can’t control the town with the Gazette, you’ll never control it. With the right editorial policy you could crucify Starkey, Macey and anyone else who’s standing in your way.”

He stopped me by holding up his hand. “I know,” he said. “You don’t have to tell me.”

He got to his feet and moved across the room. His face was flushed and his eyes burned feverishly. Then he walked back to his desk.

“Wait,” I said, as his thumb was hovering over a bell push. “What are you doing?”

He shot me an angry, preoccupied look. “You leave this to me,” he said. “I want to talk to my lawyer.”

“Well, talk to him,” I said, pointing to the telephone. “But don’t let anyone get his number for you. Get it yourself.”

“What the hell is all this?” he growled.

“How long have you had Miss Wilson?”

“Miss Wilson? She’s been my secretary for six months. What’s she got to do with it?”

“Only she’s had six months to work up a nice hate for you,” I said casually. “You’re not the kind of guy a girl falls for. You’d only be kidding yourself if you thought you were. If you want the Gazette you’ll have to act fast and secretly. Starkey might like the rag himself.”

“You’re either a rogue or a fool,” he said viciously. “There’s nothing wrong with Edna Wilson.”

“Get your lawyer yourself,” I said. “And don’t take chances. Let me know when you’ve got the rag. I’ll help shape its policy.” I got up and

went to the door.

“Wait.” he said. “I want to hear what you’ve been doing. Come back and tell me.”

“I’m not ready yet to tell you anything,” I said. “Get the Gazette whatever it costs. With that you can crack this case and become mayor or any damn thing you want . . . if you last that long.”

I opened the door and stepped into the lobby. I heard him mutter something, then there was a faint ping from the telephone bell as he picked up the receiver.

I moved across to Miss Wilson’s office. I made a lot less noise than a feather makes when it settles on concrete. I put my hand on the doorknob, turned it gently and went in.

Miss Wilson sat at her desk, the extension telephone receiver glued to her ear. She was drinking in everything Wolf was saying to his lawyer.

I looked at her and she looked at me. Her pupils dilated, but otherwise she remained calm.

“Good morning,” I said, smiling at her. “You should be out in the garden. The sunshine would do you good.”

She frowned, shook her head and went on listening.

I leaned over the desk and pulled the receiver out of her hand. “You don’t want to listen to him,” I said. “Listen to me. I’m much more interesting.”

Making a claw out of her hand, she struck at me. I got my face away in time, but only just in time. She snatched at the telephone, but I caught her arm and pulled her over the desk towards me. She struggled, but I kept pulling and she slid over the desk, upsetting everything on her way.

I did all this with one hand while I put the telephone back with the other. Then I eased her to the floor and held her until she got her balance.

She pushed away from me and stood among the ruin, her eyes spiteful and wild. “How dare you!” she said.

“I didn’t want you to hear what he said,” I explained, sitting on the

desk. "It wouldn't be a bad idea if you packed up and went. I can't let you kid Wolf any longer."

Anger went out of her eyes and she looked dismayed and frightened. "I wasn't doing anything," she said, her lips beginning to tremble. "Please don't tell him. I don't want to lose this job."

I shook my head. "I bet you don't. Who are you spying for? Esslinger or Starkey? Or is it someone else?"

She caught her lower lip between her teeth. Her eyes became wide and dark in a tense, white face, I thought she was going to take another swing at me, and I got ready to duck. Then she controlled herself.

"I don't know what you mean," she said evenly. "I've worked for Mr. Wolf for six months. He's never complained."

"It's six months too long. Pack up and get out. A change of air will do you good, but not half as much good as it will do Wolf."

"I take my orders from Mr. Wolf," she said coldly. "If he wants me to go, then I'll go."

"Let's ask him," I said, turning to the door.

Her eyes became dark and wide again. "No."

I went across the lobby, tapped once on Wolf's door and went in. Wolf was just putting down the telephone.

I told him about Miss Wilson.

"Get rid of her," I said. "Everything you do is being handed to Starkey or Esslinger on a plate."

His face sagged a little. "I'll talk to her," he said. "I don't want to get rid of her yet. We don't know she's telling things . . . I mean you're only guessing . . ."

I stared at him blankly. "But she was listening."

"I know, I know." He began to bluster. "Leave it to me. When I want advice about my staff I'll ask for it."

I nodded and went out.

Edna Wilson was standing in the doorway of her office. She smiled spitefully and triumphantly at me.

I smiled right back at her. "Why didn't you say he slept with you?" I said. "I wouldn't have bothered him."

Her smile went like a fist when you open your hand.

She went back into her office and slammed the door.

* * *

I turned the knob and went into the small, narrow room with the two windows, the battered typewriter desk, the filing cases and the threadbare carpet.

The thin, frowzy woman was sitting at the desk, her head in her hands. She looked at me out of red, swollen eyes.

I tipped my hat. "Who's running the Gazette?" I asked.

She waved to the further office. "He is," she said, and put her head back in her hands.

I walked to the door, tapped and went in.

Sitting behind Dixon's desk was a youth who eyed me inquiringly. He was undersized, his features small, in keeping with his stature, and regular. His skin was very fair. His clothing was neither new nor of more than ordinary quality, but it, and his manner of wearing it, was marked by a hard masculine neatness.

"What do you want?" he said in a voice as composed as his young face.

I hooked a chair towards me with my foot, sat down and took out my identity card. I gave it to him. While he was examining it I studied him. He seemed certainly less than twenty years old and he didn't look like he had ever shaved. He got through examining the identity card and handed it back. He looked with large hazel eyes under long, curling lashes at my chest.

"I often wanted to be a private dick," he said in a confiding sort of

voice. "It must be fun."

I took out the package of Lucky Strikes, tapped a couple on to the desk, rolled one to him and picked up the other.

"Thanks," he said, putting it between his over-full lips.

I set fire to the cigarettes and relaxed in the chair. "The old girl seems knocked up," I said, jerking my head to the outer office.

He nodded. "She's worked with him for years," he explained. "He wasn't such a bad old geezer, not when you got to know him." He looked round the office as if he'd lost something and then said: "Did you say what you wanted?"

"You the guy Dixon was telling me about? The guy who thought up the mass-murder idea?"

He nodded. "That's me." He spoke with quiet pride. "I told the old geezer it'd double our circulation. Did he tell you that?"

"Yeah." I stretched out my legs. "It was only to build circulation?"

"That's what I told him, but believe it myself."

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Reg Phipps. I may look a kid but I've been on the Gazette three years now."

"So you think these girls were murdered?"

He nodded. "Sure do. It's exciting, isn't it?" His eyes glowed. "Can't think what he's done with the bodies."

"He? Who?"

Phipps frowned. "The murderer, of course."

"You're guessing, aren't you? You don't know it's murder."

"I don't know it's murder," he repeated, "but I'll bet it is."

I changed the subject. "Never mind that. Who's the new editor?"

His face clouded. "Not me," he said bitterly. "Shanks doesn't believe in giving youth a chance . . . He'll dig out some old deadbeat."

“Could you do it?”

“Run this rag?” He laughed. “I could do it with an abscess in my ear.”

I told him he might not have to wait for the abscess.

“That right?” His eyes brightened, then he shook his head. “Aw, you’re kidding.”

“I told Wolf to buy the rag,” I said. “If Wolf gets it, there’s no reason why you shouldn’t run it.”

He stubbed out his cigarette and put the butt carefully in a tin box full of butts. “I give ‘em to an old guy I know,” he explained as he caught my eye. He put the box away and brooded for a moment. “It might be hell to work for Wolf,” he said finally.

I shook my head. “I’ll take care of him. What I want to be sure of is whether you can handle it or whether you’re just saying so.”

“I’m not kidding,” he said seriously. “I wrote all the stuff. Dixon handled the policy. I could do that or maybe Wolf could do it.”

I grunted. “What about her?” I nodded to the door.

“She won’t stay.” Phipps seemed sure of that. “I’d like a dame here like Ginger Rogers, or maybe Rita Hayworth.” He turned it over in his mind and added: “Betty Grable would be a snap, but I don’t suppose she’d come.”

I said I didn’t think any of them would.

He said he thought I was right.

“If Wolf got the paper, we’d bust this town wide open,” I said. “We’d go after Macey and Starkey and nail ‘em to the cross. Would you like that?”

He got excited. “I wrote one leader about Starkey once. Dixon had a fit. It never got printed. I think Macey and Starkey are a couple of bums.”

“They wouldn’t take it lying down.”

He ran inky fingers through his thick, sandy hair. “What could they do? We don’t have to be scared of them.” He looked hard at me and added: “Or do we?”

“They knocked Dixon off,” I said gently.

His large hazel eyes popped. “The old geezer had a tired ticker,” he said. “That’s what the copper said.”

“But you don’t believe all you hear, do you?”

He sat forward, his arms on the desk. I noticed his cuffs were frayed. “You wouldn’t kid me?”

“Someone tied a cord around Dixon’s neck and forgot to take it off. He was murdered all right. Macey’s playing it as heart failure. I don’t know why, but that’s the way it is.”

The boy took a long, deep breath. His face had gone a little pale, but his eyes hadn’t lost their brightness. “You mean they might knock me off too?”

“And me or Wolf.” I gave him another cigarette.

He thought about this. “If you can stand it, I can,” he said at last.

I stood up. “That’s swell. The moment Wolf tells me he’s got the paper I’ll be down to talk to you again. In the meantime, stick around and say nothing. Don’t say anything about Dixon.”

He went with me to the door. “Do you really think Wolf will let me . . .?”

“I’ll talk him into it,” I promised, then asked: “Know where I can find Audrey Sheridan?”

“She’s got an office on Sinclair Street. I forget the number, but it’s a big building with a big theatre ad in lights crawling all over it. You can’t miss it.”

“Where does she live?”

“Laurel Street. It’s an apartment building. You’ll find it halfway down on your right. It’s got a roof garden.” He sighed. “I wouldn’t mind living in it myself.”

“Maybe you will one day,” I said. “I’ll be seeing you.”

“So long,” he said, and I went into the outer office. Then I remembered something and came back.

“Does the name Edna Wilson mean anything to you?”

Phipps scowled. “Sounds familiar,” then he gave me a quick look. “What’s the idea? She’s Wolf’s secretary, ain’t she?”

I nodded. “Who else does she run around with?”

“You’re not serious? I thought she was too homey to run around with anyone.”

“Wolf doesn’t think so.”

“At his age he can’t afford to choose.”

“So there’s no one else?”

“Blackley. I saw her with him once, but he’s as bad as Wolf. Bald, old, wrinkles and the rest.”

“Who’s Blackley?”

“The District Attorney. He’s no good. You don’t think there’s anything to it, do you?”

I was thinking hard. “To it? What do you mean?”

He shrugged. “You’re talking in riddles. What’s Edna Wilson to you?”

“Listen, son,” I said, patting his shoulder, “the whole goddamn thing’s a riddle.”

Out in the street, I signalled a cab and told the driver to take me to Laurel Street. It took twelve minutes to get there and I told him to put me down at the corner.

I found the building with the roof garden halfway up the street on my right. It was a nice-looking joint and I agreed with Phipps that it would be all Tight to live in.

I walked into the lobby and went to the desk. “Mr. Selby,” I said.

The girl frowned. “No Mr. Selby here, sir.”

I said Mr. Selby was an old friend of mine and I had come two hundred miles to see him and this is where he lived. I said if she didn’t know the names of her clients she’d better call the manager.

She produced the register to prove I was wrong. Audrey Sheridan's room was number 853. I said I must have made a mistake, that I was sorry and could I use the phone? She showed me where the phones were and I thanked her.

I put a call through to room 853 but there was no answer. The phone was out of sight of the girl at the desk and the elevator was right by me. I rode up to the eighth floor, walked down a long deserted corridor until I came to 853. I rapped, waited and then took out my pocketknife. I was inside in thirty seconds.

The red and cream sitting room was pleasant and livened by flowers in squat pottery vases. A faint smell of lilac gave the right feminine touch.

I put my hat on the walnut settee and searched the room from wall to wall. I opened every drawer, cupboard, box, trunk and subjected its contents to examination by eyes and fingers. I tested every piece of clothing for telltale bulges or for the sound of crinkling paper. I looked under rugs and furniture. I pulled down blinds to see that nothing had been rolled up in them for concealment. I examined dishes and pans and food and food-containers. I opened the flush-box in the bathroom and looked out of windows to see that nothing was hung below them on the outside. I took the apartment to pieces systematically, but I didn't find the three photographs nor Mary Drake's handkerchief.

I hadn't made more mess than necessary, but I had made a mess. I stood looking around the room, a little tired and depressed. Although I hadn't found what I had come for I had managed to create a picture of Audrey Sheridan by her possessions. Her clothes for one thing. A woman's clothes can be an indication of her character —especially her underwear. Audrey Sheridan's underwear was spartan in its severity—no lace, no colours, no fancy cut. Her clothes were-ultra smart. Tailored suits, three or four pairs of flannel trousers in various shades, high-neck jumpers, bright-coloured shirts. All smart and all carefully chosen.

Her cosmetics comprised cold cream, lipsticks and lilac scent. The apartment was full of books. Even books in the kitchen and bathroom. There was a radio on the table by the window and a big library of gramophone records in a cabinet by the door.

One look at the titles of the books and the records convinced me that Audrey Sheridan had a serious mind. I have always distrusted serious-minded women; but a serious-minded woman who took the trouble to

learn jiu-jitsu and who didn't hesitate to steal evidence from a fellow dick looked like poison to me.

I set fire to a cigarette, tossed the match into the fireplace and dragged down a lungful of smoke.

I decided it was time for Audrey Sheridan and me to have a little talk.

With one last glance around the disordered room, I went out, closing the door behind me.

* * *

At the far end of a light, airy passage was a door lettered in bright gilt on pebbled glass: "The Alert Agency."

I turned the doorknob and went in.

The room was small. Two windows covered by cream net curtains faced me.

Three armchairs stood against the apple-green painted walls and on a light oak table under the windows were scattered copies of Saturday Evening Post, Harpers and the New Yorker. Bowls of bright flowers made pools of colour around the room and a thick Turkey carpet, thick enough to tickle my ankles, covered the floor. As an outer office of a detective agency it was something to see.

I was just recovering from the shock when I ran into another. The door leading into the main office jerked open and Jeff Gordan slid out. He had a gun in his hand and he pointed it at me. The muzzle of the gun looked to me as big and as steady as a tunnel.

"For God's sake," Jeff said, showing yellow teeth, "look who's here."

"Well, well," I countered, "if it isn't Jeff! You do get around, don't you?"

He threatened me with the gun. "Grab some cloud, you son of a bitch, and don't start anything you can't finish."

I raised my hands to my shoulders. "The Warner Brothers have a lot to answer for," I said, with feeling. "Can't you cut this Bogart stuff out?"

Jeff called through the open door: "Hey, look what's blown in."

A man's voice said sharply: "Who is it? The voice was high-pitched and staccato; the same voice that had threatened Dixon over the telephone.

"The New York dick," Jeff said, grinning evilly at me.

"Bring him in here," the high-pitched voice said.

Jeff jerked his head at the door. "Get in, you."

"Now wait a minute," I said hurriedly. "I came to see Miss Sheridan. If she's all tied up, I'll come back."

Jeff sniggered. "She's tied up all right," he said, "but that ain't going to trouble you." His face changed to purple viciousness. "Get in, you louse!"

I shrugged and, keeping my hands up, walked into the other room.

The room was as big as the outer office was small. Another fitted Turkey carpet covered the floor. A big mahogany desk stood by the open window, and two armchairs, filing cases, and other office equipment completed the furnishing.

The room had none of the ordered neatness of the outer office. It looked like it had been hit by a hurricane. Drawers were pulled out, papers were scattered all over the floor, filing cabinets spilled their contents on the carpet.

There were three people in the room. A girl and two men.

The girl was, of course, Audrey Sheridan. I was about to give her a cursory glance, but I changed my mind. I stared plenty. She was sitting in a chair set in the middle of the room. Her hands were tied behind the chair. For the moment I dismissed that as unimportant. I concentrated on her as a person. As a person, Audrey Sheridan was something to see. She had broad shoulders and narrow hips and a figure that Varga likes to draw. Her eyes were large, blue in colour, with long, silky eyelashes. Her mouth was large, full-lipped and scarlet. Her hair, red shot with gold, fell to her shoulders in long, thick waves. If you can't imagine her from this, then think of Joan Crawford and you'll be near enough.

She was wearing a smart white and blue checked coat, powder-blue

trousers, brown buckskin shoes and a high-necked cashmere sweater in blue.

One of the men sat on the desk opposite her, one foot on the desk and his hands clasping his knee. The other man stood behind her, his hands on her shoulders and his eyes watching the man sitting on the desk.

I guessed the man on the desk was Rube Starkey. I looked at him with interest. He was small; small-boned but sinewy. His face was pockmarked, his eyes flat and black, his mouth lipless. He was dressed in a white flannel suit, and a white slouch hat was pulled well over one eye, giving him a racy, jaunty look. But there was nothing jaunty about his expression.

The man behind Audrey Sheridan was in the same class as Jeff Gordan—big, brainless, apish and tough.

“Spewack,” Jeff said to Starkey, and jerking his head at me.

“What do you want?” Starkey said, looking at me with hard, calculating eyes.

I eyed him back. “What goes on?” I said. “You’re not mayor yet, Starkey; you’d better cut this stuff out. Let her go!”

Jeff pulled me round by grabbing my shoulder. I saw his fist coming up from his ankles and I swayed my body to the right. I felt the draught of wind as his fist whistled past my ear, then I hit him in the belly, and as he came forward I socked him in the jaw.

The gun fell from his hand and I made a dive at it. Starkey got there first. He must have moved with the speed of a lizard. His hand whipped it up as I reached him. He tried to turn, but I was on top of him. I socked him in the body, grabbed him by his belt and arm and tossed him at the other thug who was pounding across the room to get at me. They went down in a heap, upsetting Audrey Sheridan. They all sprawled on the floor together.

I had no time to jump them as Jeff came at me. His face was congested and his eyes bloodshot. I stepped inside a haymaker he sent over, socked him with a left and a right and stopped a bang in the ribs that shook me to the toes.

I backed away as the other thug scrambled to his feet. Both of them came at me. I pushed a chair in Jeff’s way, took a punch on the

shoulder from the other thug and socked him between the eyes.

I saw Starkey had got to his feet, and as the other two started on me again he called them off. They drew back and we all eyed each other.

Starkey had a flat automatic in his hand. "Stay where you are," he said, in a furious hissing voice.

"You can't use that heater here," I said. "If you want me, you'll damn well have to come and get me." Whipping round, I snatched up a bowl of flowers and threw it at him. He only saved himself by falling flat on his face.

The other two nearly fell over themselves trying to get at me. I dodged round the desk, snatched up the telephone and hit Jeff across his face with it as he rushed me. He blundered back with a howl of pain and cannoned into the other thug. I picked up a chair and stood by the window.

"Now listen, you swine," I yelled at them. "Make one move and the chair'll go through the window. That'll bring a cop, and I'll pin an assault charge on you that even Macey won't be able to lift."

Growling like an animal, Jeff prepared to charge me, but Starkey shouted: "Hold it!"

Once again we all eyed each other.

"Tell those jerks to get the hell outa here," I said to Starkey. "I want to talk to you and talk to you alone."

His white pockmarked face was expressionless. After staring at me for a long minute he suddenly said, "Beat it," to the others.

When they had gone, I put down the chair: "Someone's trying to frame you for murder," I said. "Even Macey can't help you if the frame's good enough."

Starkey said nothing. He straightened his coat, put on his hat again and went over and sat in a chair. He nodded his head at the girl lying on her side, still tied to the chair.

I went over to her and fiddled at the knots.

"Watch him and don't bother about me," she whispered.

That advice came about a split second too late. Starkey, reaching

forward with the speed of a striking snake, kicked at my temple. His hard pointed shoe crashed against my head and I fell flat on Audrey Sheridan.

Dimly I heard Starkey's voice, high-pitched with excitement, shout: "Nail him, you lugs!"

Then hands seized me, dragged me to my feet, and before I could clear my head something exploded on my jaw and I crashed against the wall. I slithered to the floor, peered up at the savagely grinning face of Jeff Gordan and blocked his foot with my arm as he kicked at me.

I grabbed his leg before he could get out of the way and shoved it hard in his direction. He waved his arms, cursed and went over backwards. I was nearly on my feet when the other thug drove at me. He tackled me, his shoulder catching me in the belly, his arms around my hips. I crashed to the floor, slammed hard at his face, and saw Starkey, holding his automatic by the barrel, running at me. I tried to twist away, but the butt of the gun caught me on the top of my head. Lights flashed before my eyes and then I slipped off into darkness.

I couldn't have been out for more than five minutes. I became aware of someone tying my hands behind my back and of the burning pain that crawled up my arms as the cord bit into my flesh.

A hand came out of the mist, fastened onto my shirtfront and dragged me to my feet. My legs bent, but the hand kept me from falling. I shook my head and Jeff Gordan came into my vision. He shook me gently backwards and forwards, then his hand came up and he slapped my face three times. They were hard, heavy slaps and they made my eyes water.

I mumbled curses at him and he slapped me some more, dragged me to a chair and slammed me down into it. Then he went out of my vision.

I sat slumped in the chair, a curtain of red before my eyes. I wanted only to get at Gordan and hammer him until there was nothing left of him. I wanted to take Starkey and beat his head on the corner of the desk and see the white mess of his brain spew out on the carpet. Even though I was dazed and pain crawled through my body, I was conscious of hating these men as I had never hated anyone before.

A sudden sharp cry snapped me out of my rage. I looked up, screwed up my eyes in an effort to focus, saw figures in a mist which suddenly cleared away.

Gordan and the other tough had got Audrey Sheridan pinned across the desk.

Her coat was off and Starkey was bolding a lighted cigarette on her ann.

The two of them had all they could do to hold her. One pulled down on her legs while the other held her arms. Her back was arched over the desk and her body squirmed as the glowing end of the cigarette burnt her.

I drew a deep breath, kicked away the chair and reeled over to them. My shoulder caught Starkey and sent him staggering back. He turned viciously, sidestepped the kick I aimed at him and his sharp, bony knuckles thudded into my face.

I went over and hit the carpet. Almost before I lit, I caught his legs between mine and shoved on a lock. He came down close to me, hissing like an angry snake. He tried to reach my face with his fists but he was just out of range. I put more pressure on the lock and his face turned green. Then he began to beat on the carpet, squealing to Jeff for help.

Jeff let go of Audrey and came at me. I gave one more squeeze to the lock, heard Starkey catch his breath and tried to twist away from Gordan's foot that whistled at my head. I only got a quarter of the steam in the kick but it was enough to stun me. I relaxed limply on the carpet.

The rest of what happened was like a dream. I was only half-conscious of it, but enough to know what happened without being able to do anything about it.

When Gordan let go of Audrey's hands, she sat up and did something to the other thug. He fell down on his knees, holding his hands to the back of his neck, making a whining sound. She slid off the desk.

I avoided Starkey's rush, and tossed a heavy ashtray through the window.

The crash of breaking glass was followed by a silence you could cut with a knife.

Then Starkey said: "You'll be seeing me again." The vicious anger in his voice came through the, mists that clogged my brain and chilled me.

A boot crashed into my side and then a door slammed.

I settled myself more comfortably on the carpet and dissociated myself from further activities.

I must have lain there at least ten minutes before I was disturbed again. Someone shook me gently and I was conscious of a smell of lilac. I opened one eye cautiously and found Audrey Sheridan bending over me.

Her thick tresses almost touched my face.

I dug up a low groan and firmly closed my eye. She shook me again.

“Don’t be a baby,” she said. “You’re not really hurt. It’s only because you’re a little soft and out of condition. Come on, sit up. I’ve driven them away and it’s quite safe now.”

This annoyed me. I opened my eyes and regarded her coldly. “Is that a nice thing to say?” I demanded heatedly. “I get kicked, trodden on, bashed on the head and beaten up by three great thugs and you’ve got the crust to say I’m not hurt.”

She sat back on her heels, her hands resting on her thighs, and smiled. “I thought New York detectives were made of iron,” she said.

I felt my scalp gingerly. “You’ve got that out of a book,” I said, raising myself on my elbow and wincing as pain stabbed through my head. “I’m a mass of bruises and shattered bones. My back’s broken and my truss’s slipped. I’ll never be able to walk again.”

She continued to regard me with the half-mocking smile. Then I remembered how Starkey had burned her with the cigarette and I gazed at her with blank incredulity. She was pale but her smile was genuine all right.

“Talking about being made of iron,” I went on, “you’re not so bad yourself.”

She looked at the livid red circle on her arm and grimaced. “That hurt,” she said. “But it wasn’t that I minded so much as the way they did it.” Her violet eyes glittered angrily. “What filthy brutes some men are!”

I looked around the disordered office, with my head in my hands and my elbows on my knees. “You wouldn’t have any hard liquor in this

joint, would you?" I asked. "I could do with a shot, and it wouldn't poison you."

She got to her feet and moved slowly and limply across the room. From a cupboard she produced a bottle of Scotch and two glasses. She came back and flopped on the floor again.

I took the bottle from her and poured out two stiff drinks. "Hair on your chest," I said, nodding at her.

"Hair on yours," she said, nodding back.

We drank.

"That's better," I sighed, sniffing the whisky. "What happened? Did the cops come?"

She nodded. "While you were swooning on the floor, I dealt with the cops," she said. "Trust a man to leave all the dirty work for the woman to do. I told them the ashtray slipped out of my hands. They believed me. And after I'd said what big strong men they were and how grateful I was for their kindness, they went away as smug and happy as only men can be."

I regarded her reproachfully. "Something tells me you're a cynic," I said. "In my present condition I'm not in a fit state to talk to cynics. Shall we patch ourselves up and go home? Perhaps we can meet again later when I'm feeling stronger and have a long intimate talk."

"All right," she said, setting down her drink. "We'll do that. Do you think you're strong enough to reach the bathroom, or would you like me to carry you?"

"Sarcasm in one so young reveals a sophistication I abhor," I said, crawling painfully to my feet.

"Do you usually talk like a Walt Whitman fan or are you lightheaded?"

I balanced myself carefully on the flat of my feet and held onto the desk. "Lady, I'm lightheaded, but you want to hear me when I'm drunk."

She showed me the bathroom and stood by as I bathed my bruised head. I felt a lot better when I was through, although my ribs gave me some pain.

“Would you like me to bandage your head?” she asked. “You’d look awfully sweet and people would think you’ve been using it to break coal with.”

“Never mind,” I returned, surveying myself in the mirror. I didn’t look any worse than if I’d been run over by a truck. “But if you’ll give me something to work with I’ll bandage your arm.”

She shook her head. “No, thanks. I’ve always looked after myself and I won’t make a change now.”

We went across the devastated room to the door. “I’m sorry I’m not well enough to help you put all this straight,” I said, stopping and looking round. “But I think it would be a little too much for me.”

“That’s all right. You don’t have to act like a gentleman with me. I’m a detective myself.”

I sighed. “Stop ribbing me,” I complained. “And get that arm fixed. We ought to talk. How about tonight? I think I’ll be strong enough by then. Have dinner with me?”

She shook her head. . “I don’t eat with detectives,” she said firmly. “I like to keep business and fun as far apart as possible.”

“Don’t be difficult,” I pleaded. “You could have an awful lot of fun with me.”

She regarded me with serious eyes. “I believe I could,” she said, “but that doesn’t mean I’m going to.”

“Okay, I won’t try to persuade you. Suppose I come out to your place sometime tonight? We have a lot to talk about.”

She hesitated, then nodded. “I’ll be in after nine o’clock. Goodbye now, and thanks for horning in. If you feel faint, get yourself some smelling-salts.”

I said I would and left her.

chapter four

I was awakened around six o'clock by someone knocking on my door. I raised my head cautiously, decided I felt better, and went over to unlock the door. As I passed the mirror I took a quick look and winced. I still looked pretty terrible.

Marian French gazed at me with startled eyes as I let her in. "Whatever's happened?" she asked, her hand going to her face with a gesture of shocked concern.

"I had an argument with a midget," I said, smiling crookedly. "It's surprising how strong the little guys are. But come in. I don't feel as bad as I look."

"Oh, your poor head!" She came in, took a quick look at the crumpled bed and went on: "I've disturbed you."

"It's all right," I said, sitting on the bed and feeling my head gingerly. "I was getting up, anyway."

There was a bump on the top of my head that felt no smaller than a doorknob and my ribs were still sore, but I could have been worse.

She sat beside me and with cool, gentle fingers explored the bruise and the bump.

"I'll fix that for you," she said. "Just you lie back on the bed and take it easy."

"Don't you bother," I said, trying to appear brave about it. "A little bang like this doesn't worry me."

"Don't be tough and obstinate," she said firmly. "Lie down and leave this to me." She pushed me back on the bed. That was all right with me. I considered I was due for a little fussing.

"Now I won't be a minute," she said. "Don't move until I come back."

When she had gone I lit a cigarette and related. The sun made pools on the shabby carpet and the room was hot, but I didn't care. The telephone jangled and, frowning, I reached for it.

I recognized Wolf's growling voice. "I've got the Gazette," he told me.

"Now what the hell am I going to do with it?"

"You've got it?" I repeated blankly. "That's fast work, isn't it?"

He gave the nearest thing he could to a laugh. "I told you when I want a thing it happens. And let me tell you, it cost plenty; not that I give a damn about that."

"Swell," I said. "We can't do anything tonight, but we'll get together at the office tomorrow morning. With the Gazette we can run Macey ragged."

He grunted. "I don't know a damn thing about handling a newspaper," he said, "but I guess I can learn fast enough."

I told him about Reg Phipps. "He's young, but he's got guts. Keep him on the job and you won't go wrong," I advised.

"He can stay," he said. "But how about the woman?"

"I'll get you someone," I promised. "We'll talk about that tomorrow."

"Have you found anything yet?" he demanded.

That was something I didn't want to talk about. "I'm working on it," I said, and hurriedly hung up on him.

I was calling the Gazette office when Marian came back. She carried a bowl containing cracked ice and odds and ends that looked interesting.

I winked at her as Phipps came on the line. "It's okay," I told him. "Wolf's got the Gazette and you're in. We'll be along tomorrow morning."

He didn't seem to believe it, but when I persuaded him I wasn't kidding he sounded excited enough. I told him to take it easy and cut the connection.

"You shouldn't be phoning," Marian said severely.

I flopped back on the bed. "That's my final rally before I croak," I said feebly.

She made an ice bag with the cracked ice and a strip of flannel and

put it on my head. It felt swell.

“Isn’t that better?” she asked, sitting on the bed beside me.

I took her hand. “Terrific. I wouldn’t mind having a tap like this every day if I had a nurse as nice as you.”

She took her hand away and tried to look severe. “You can’t be as bad as you make out,” she said, moving away a foot. “You’ll be making passes soon.”

“Give me a couple of hours and you’ll be surprised what I will do,” I kidded, then I went on: “How’s the uplift and pant business?”

Although her face clouded she forced a smile. “I’m getting discouraged,” she confided. “If something doesn’t happen soon I’ll be on the bread-line. Cranville isn’t any good for the stuff I’m peddling.”

I regarded her thoughtfully. She wasn’t as good as Betty Grable or Rita Hayworth or Ginger Rogers, but she wasn’t bad. I could imagine Reg Phipps going for her in a big way.

“Can you use a typewriter and do shorthand?” I asked.

She looked puzzled, but said she could.

“There’s a job going on the Cranville Gazette: If you want a change from selling, you can have it.”

“You mean that?” There was eagerness in her voice.

“Sure, if you want it.”

“Would it pay steady money? I’m getting tired of wondering when next I’m going to eat.”

I looked sharply at her. “As bad as that?”

She took the ice bag away and changed the ice. “As bad as that,” she repeated seriously.

“Well, you’re hired. Send your samples back and tell your boss to go bowl a hoop,” I said, patting her hand. “Report to the Gazette tomorrow and tell Reg Phipps—he’s the editor—that you’re his new secretary. Tell him I said so.”

She looked doubtful. “You’re sure it’s all right? Perhaps he won’t like

me.”

“Phipps?” I laughed. “You ought to see who he’s got now. He’ll be all over you.”

“I can’t say how grateful—” she began, but I stopped her.

“The job isn’t all that good,” I said. “Maybe you won’t like it. Maybe we’ll curl up before we start, but if you want to take the chance, it’s yours.”

“I’ll take the chance,” she said.

“Then that’s settled.”

She glanced at her watch. “Now don’t think I’m ungrateful if I leave you, but I promised to go out with Ted Esslinger and I’ve got to change.”

“Esslinger?” I raised my eyebrows. “He’s a fast worker, isn’t he? He only met you last night.”

She blushed. “Well, you know how it is. I hadn’t anything to do and he phoned.”

“I was only kidding,” I said, not wanting to embarrass her. “And he’s a nice kid. Hope you have a good time.”

“Now don’t be doing anything you shouldn’t. With a head like that you might have concussion.” She moved to the door. “Sure there’s nothing I can get you before I go?”

I said, “No,” and added: “If Esslinger arrives before you’re dressed, shoo him in here. I’ll keep him company until you’re ready.”

She nodded, said she hoped I’d be better in the morning, and thanked me again for the job.

After she had gone I lit another cigarette and thought about her. She was a good kid and I was glad to give her a break. From her my thoughts drifted to Audrey Sheridan. Now, she was a surprise. I hadn’t expected to find quite such an independent, smart beauty in a dump like Cranville. I wondered where she got her money from. If what I’d heard was right her detective agency was a flop, but the appearance of the place and her apartment showed she must have money. I wondered if her old man had left her anything, and decided he must

have.

The way she had stood up to Starkey showed she had plenty of guts. That's one thing I liked in a woman. She was a beauty too. I almost regretted I was working in the opposite camp. It might be plenty of fun to work with her. I wondered how Colonel Forsberg would react if I suggested he hire her as an International Investigations operative. He'd probably have a stroke.

I was just beginning to think of the best way to get even with Starkey when Ted Esslinger put his head round the door.

"Come in," I said, sitting up and balancing the ice bag skillfully on my head.

"Gee!" he exclaimed, staring at me. "What a wreck you look!"

"Sit down," I said, jerking my thumb to a chair near the bed. "Never mind how I look. I want to talk to you."

He sat down and continued to stare at me with a worried expression on his face. "What happened?"

"I fell over a heap of feathers," I said shortly. "Any news of Mary Drake?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. There's trouble in town. A mob went clown to police headquarters and there was some shooting."

"Shooting?" It was my turn to stare at him. "Anyone hurt?"

"No . . . the police fired over their heads. It scared them and they ran away. You know, Mr. Spewack, if this goes on much longer there'll be bad trouble in Cranville."

"As far as I'm concerned," I said grimly, "that's what I hope will happen. With the town out of hand, Macey'll have to do something."

He looked at me curiously. "What can he do that you can't?"

I grinned. "Plenty, but never mind that. Who's burying Dixon?"

"Dixon?"

"Yeah. Is your father burying him?"

"No—the city authorities are handling the funeral. Father supplied the

coffin, if that's what you mean, but the authorities “

“What I want to know is this,” I said patiently. “First, where is Dixon's body? Second, who is putting him in the coffin?”

“He's at the city morgue,” Ted said, looking bewildered. “The coffin was delivered there this morning. The morgue attendants will put the body in the coffin, and then it will be taken to father's funeral parlour. The funeral will be on the following day.”

“So no one will see the body except the morgue attendants?”

“I suppose not,” he returned, his bewilderment growing. “But what's the idea?”

“Never mind the idea,” I said. “I'm asking the questions. One more thing. What made you suspect the Street-Camera was connected with the kidnapping?”

“Why, I told you. Luce McArthur was photographed on the street and showed me the ticket—”

“I know that, but it isn't enough to tie it to the kidnapping. It's too good a guess.” I gave him a hard look. “You know something.”

He looked confused, started to say I was wrong, but petered out.

“Loosen up,” I said. It was a hard job to look tough with an ice bag on top of my head, but I must have succeeded, because he looked scared.

“I—I didn't think it was important,” he said, going red. “It was something Dixon told me—”

“Dixon? Did you know Dixon?”

“Why, of course . . . I've known him ever since I was a kid—”

“Never mind the autobiography,” I snapped. “What did Dixon say?”

“Just that the Street-Camera was mixed up in the kidnapping. He didn't believe the girls were murdered. He thought——”

“I know what he thought,” I growled. “So it wasn't your theory after all? It was something Dixon thought up?”

He gulped. “Yes. I—I wanted you to think . . .”

I grinned suddenly and lay back on the bed. "You wanted me to think you had ideas of your own—was that it?" I said. "Forget it. It doesn't matter. Did Dixon say why he suspected the Street-Camera?"

Ted shook his head. "I did ask him, but he changed the subject."

"Well, we can't ask him now," I said regretfully, "but I'd like to know just why he thought that."

"He was right," Ted said. "That picture of Mary Drake clinches it. What are you going to do about that?"

I didn't want to answer questions just then, so I said I was working on it and I had a hell of a headache. I was telling him just how badly it ached when Marian came in. She was wearing a white linen dress and a large floppy hat trimmed in red. She looked swell.

"Get off, you two," I said, closing my eyes. "I want to get some more sleep. The ice-bag's doing fine and I'll be okay by tomorrow."

Marian fussed round me for a minute or so and then they took themselves off. I thought they looked a pretty nice-looking couple. Maybe Marian was a little old for a kid like Esslinger, but she would keep him out of mischief and they looked right together.

When they had gone, I grabbed the telephone and called the Gazette again.

Phipps came on the line. He said I was lucky to catch him as he was just going home.

I grunted. "From now on, Reg," I told him, "you haven't got a home. Know where the city morgue is?"

He said he did, and what did I want with the city morgue?

"We won't talk now," I said. "Come here around midnight. I've got a job for you."

"Okay." His voice crawled with curiosity. "Is it something to do with the morgue?"

I didn't enlighten him but asked him instead if he could handle a camera.

"Sure. Do you want me to bring my outfit?"

I said he must be clairvoyant, because that was just what I did want him to do. "Put on a dark suit, wear sneakers, and try to pretend you're a burglar," I told him. "And be here by midnight."

Before he could ask any more questions I hung up.

* * *

Audrey Sheridan opened the door of her apartment, raised her eyebrows in mock surprise and stood to one side to let me in.

She looked very nice in a white housecoat relieved by a complicated pattern of red flowers, white silk pyjamas and red sandals. I thought how like a Varga picture she looked.

"This is a surprise," she said, closing the door and leading the way into the red and cream sitting room. "So you made it—broken back and all. I imagined you'd be in bed with a pretty nurse fussing over you."

"Not a bad guess," I said, noting the apartment had been tidied up. "The trouble was the nurse got tired of it before I did." I put my hat on a chair and went on: "How's the arm?"

She wandered over to a trolley containing bottles, glasses and cracked ice.

"It's all right, thank you," she said, putting ice in one of the glasses. "I hope your head's not as bad as it looks."

I said it was all right. In spite of our concern for each other I was aware of a hostile and uneasy atmosphere in the room.

"That's splendid." She looked at me with a secretive, amused smile. "I'm sure you would like a drink. What will you have?"

"Do we have to be so polite?" I asked, joining her at the trolley. "After all, we're just fellow dicks."

"That's very flattering," she said, "but I'm only an amateur. Will you have whisky?"

I said I would, and added: "You're not doing bad for an amateur."

“Really? You’re just saying that. I know what men are.” She gave me the drink and went over to the settee and sat down.

“Do you usually have a bunch of thugs working you over when clients call?” I asked, sitting down in an armchair opposite her.

“Oh, that?” She shook her head. “Rube lost his temper. He isn’t usually as bad as that.”

“You mean you wouldn’t give him the handkerchief?”

She looked down at her sandals and then said: “I suppose you haven’t had time to see much of the town? It’s not very nice, of course, but there are parts that are better than others.”

“Never mind about the town,” I returned. “Tell me how you learned jiu-jitsu.”

“Let’s not talk about me,” she said quickly. “Tell me about yourself. Have you been a detective long?”

“I’d like to tell you the story of my life. It’s full of excitement, but right now I haven’t the time,” I said. “Maybe later we’ll get together and take our hair down. You can listen to me and I’ll listen to you. But you said you liked to keep pleasure apart from business, so that’s what we’ll do.”

She raised her eyebrows, but didn’t say anything.

“Four girls have disappeared from this town. You and I’ve been hired to find them. So far everyone I’ve talked to doesn’t give a damn what’s happened to them. I’ve only been on the job for forty-eight hours, but that’s too long. All the time people are sorting out their differences these kids are either in danger or the trail’s getting cold. Wouldn’t it be an idea if we got together and pooled information?”

“It might be,” she said cautiously. “It depends whether you have any information to trade or whether you just want to find out what I know.”

“You’re set on breaking this case yourself, aren’t you?”

Her eyes darkened. “When my father died he left me the agency. It was all he had to leave me. He was proud of it and he’d done a good job with it considering he was sick and old. He expected me to carry on, and I’m going to carry on. No one’s taken me seriously yet in this

town, but they will before I'm through. They've laughed at me and they think I'm crazy to try to make a success of it, but I'm going ahead and no one's going to stop me."

"In the meantime," I said dryly, "four girls are missing and you haven't found them. Don't you think it'd be smart to throw in with me? Together we might get somewhere."

Her mouth set in an obstinate line. "I wonder what makes you think you're going to get somewhere?" she asked coldly.

"You pulled a fast one on me last night," I reminded her. "With those three photographs and the handkerchief I would have had got the photographs. That's what I mean by wasting time. We're enough to nail Macey. You took the handkerchief and maybe you're working against each other."

"I didn't get the photographs," she said in a low voice. "Someone had beaten me to it."

"See Dixon there?" I said casually.

She looked up sharply. "Dixon? What do you mean?"

"Dixon was in an armchair by the window. He was as dead as a pork chop. Didn't you see him?"

She stared at me. "He wasn't there—you're fooling, aren't you?" She could easily have missed him if she had used a flashlight and had gone straight to the drawer and then out again.

"I'm not fooling. Don't you see you're sticking your neck out If someone had grabbed you, Macey could have pinned the killing onto you."

"But Dixon died of heart failure "

"Okay, okay, let's skip that," I said, not wanting to go over it again. "Maybe he did die of heart failure, but it wasn't a smart move on your part to break into his office."

"You've got a nerve!" she said indignantly. "Why, you were doing the very same thing!"

I grinned at her. "Maybe I was," I said. "But this isn't a job for a girl to handle. This is a political set-up with a big rake-off hanging to it. Do

you think anyone is going to let you gum up their racket?"

She sat forward. "And do you think they'd stop for you?"

"It's my job and I get paid for it," I explained patiently. "Besides, I'm a man."

She leaned back and surveyed me with a half angry, half amused expression.

"I'm not convinced," she said. "You'll have to work harder than this."

"All right," I said. "Let's take it another way. Do you think these girls have been kidnapped or do you think it's murder?"

She blew smoke in a thin cloud above my head. "What do you think?"

"It points to kidnapping. If it was murder—what's the motive and where are the bodies?"

She nodded agreement. "What is it and where are they?" She said, her eyes mocking me.

I began to get annoyed. "Maybe you don't think it's either kidnapping or murder?"

"What's left?" she asked, looking aimlessly out of the window.

"Suppose Starkey paid them to duck out of sight? That would discredit your client and mine, wouldn't it?"

"Did you think that up all by yourself?" she said with exaggerated astonishment.

"Now look, sister," I said, "this kind of cross-talk is getting us nowhere. You can help me and I can help you. You've got the background of this town at your fingertips. I've got the experience. Are you going to play or aren't you?"

"I'm sorry to have to disappoint you," she said quietly, "but I'm handling the case myself."

"Then you're a bigger dope than I thought you were," I said, annoyed by her obstinacy. "Esslinger's only hiring you because he wants a stooge. He doesn't care whether these girls are found or not. All he's worrying about is the election. That's why he's picked you to work on the case. Cranville looks on you as the pattern-plated, courageous

little dick who's keeping her father's name going. They laugh at you, but they like you. Esslinger's trading on that. Can't you get that into your thick skull?"

She stiffened, her eyes angry and hurt. "I'm still going ahead," she said, rising to her feet. "And no one's going to stop me. And the last person who can stop me is a self-opinionated flatfoot from New York!"

I stood up too. "Is that so?" I said angrily. "Let me tell you something. You're a stubborn little fool and you want some sense spanked into you. I've a mind to do it myself."

"You and who else?" she said scornfully.

"Just me," I said grimly, picking up my hat. "I've tamed better girls than you in the time it takes to wind my watch."

She jerked open the door. "Tell that fairy-tale to someone who'll believe it— if you can find anyone that simple," she said with fine scorn.

"I'm warning you," I said, wagging my finger in her face. "This job is too tough for you. You'll only get your pretty little neck broken. Keep out of it and take up knitting.. I'll even buy you the wool."

"Oh!" she exclaimed furiously. "I hate you! Don't you ever dare come here again!"

I stepped up to her, pulled her to me and kissed her. We stood for a moment like that, my arm round her shoulders and my lips on hers. Then I stepped back and stared at her.

"Now why in hell did I do that?" I said blankly.

She put her hand to her lips and stared back at me. The anger had gone out of her eyes. "Perhaps you wanted to," she said in a meek, low voice, and closed the door gently in my face.

* * *

As I entered the lobby of the Eastern Hotel I spotted Reg Phipps talking to the dark, sulky-looking receptionist.

She was holding a movie magazine on her lap and chewing gum, an indifferent expression on her face. Reg leaned on the desk and seemed to be putting his personality over on a short wave.

He looked over his shoulder as he heard me come in and his eyes brightened.

"I'll be seeing you," he said to the girl. "Try not to pine for me."

She gave him a scathing look and returned to her magazine.

"Hello," I said to him, and reached for my key. "What's cooking, beautiful?" I went on to the girl. "Still keeping in good shape, I see."

She eyed my bruises. "I look after what I've got," she said coldly. "You're not all that good you can afford to wear your face out as fast as you seem to be doing."

"I got this in a fight," I said, tapping my bruise and wishing I hadn't. "That's the kind of guy I am. Any time you say so you can have my chest for a rug. I'm tough—full of fight, liquor and——"

"Hot air," she cut in. "I know. Toughs are ten a dime in this town."

I patted her shoulder, smiled at her and promised to send her a stuffed snake if I found one.

"If it's got to be a snake, come yourself," she said acidly, and picked up her magazine again.

Reg and I went upstairs together.

"Didn't I say twelve?" I said, glancing at my wristwatch. It was a few minutes past ten-thirty.

"It wasn't worth it to go back home," he explained. "So I looked in to talk to Nora. I'll go back if you ain't ready."

"That Nora?" I said. "The dark, sulky one with the built-up area?"

His leer was too youthful to be impressive. "That's her," he said. "Her father runs this hotel. I've been trying to make that dame for the last six years." Seeing my startled glance, he added: "We were at school together."

I unlocked my door and we went in. "You be careful," I warned him. "Something tells me that baby's dynamite."

"She is," he said gravely. "Why do you think I'm working on her?"

I waved him to a chair. "Sit down and stop boasting," I said, giving him a cigarette. "Got your camera?"

"It's in the car," he said, eyeing me with suppressed excitement. "What's cooking?"

"We've got a nice little job to do tonight," I said, sitting on the bed. "Dixon's at the city morgue. We're going to get a picture of his body. Then we'll come out slap across the Gazette with picture and story of Dixon's murder, and how Macey tried to cover it up."

Reg's eyes popped. "For the love of Mike!" he said. "You don't think we'll get away with that, do you?"

"Why not?"

He sat back, gaping at me. "It'll blow the lid right off this town," he began.

"That's what I want," I broke in. "It's the only way to get something done. Listen, Reg, I'll never find these girls until people cooperate. They won't cooperate so long as they're thinking only of the election. I want you to write a story along these lines." I told him about the Street-Camera angle, and what had been happening since last I saw him. "Now you know the facts. The way to put it over is to ask questions. Do the people of Cranville know all four missing girls were photographed by the Street-Camera and that Dixon had copies of the photographs? The photos were stolen and Dixon was murdered. Who stole them and killed Dixon? Who owns the Street-Camera? Why did Chief of Police Macey say Dixon died of heart failure? Look at the picture printed below. Does that look like heart failure? Do you get it? That's the way to put it over. Let Cranville make up its own mind."

"It's terrific," he said, driving a small fist into the palm of his hand. "But, brother, what a stink there'll be! If this ain't asking for Starkey to put a slug into us, I don't know what is."

I looked at him thoughtfully. "Plenty of time to back out, Reg," I reminded him.

"Don't be funny," he returned, his eyes sparkling. "This is just my meat. Was Wolf on the level when he said I could stick?"

I nodded. "Yeah," I said. "It means a hundred bucks a week for you,

Reg, and that includes danger-money.”

“Aw, you’re kidding,” he said. “I’d do it for half of that.”

“It’s just enough,” I said, feeling my bruised head. “If I can get this story on the streets we’ll be getting somewhere.” I stubbed out my cigarette and lit another.

“I’ve found a dame to replace the old girl. I think she’ll be useful all right.”

Reg’s face fell. “Gee!” he exclaimed. “I was hoping I’d be able to pick my own secretary. What’s she like?”

“All right,” I said, “as long as you aren’t too fussy. Maybe she has bow legs and flat feet, but if she keeps them under a desk, why should you worry?”

He looked pretty miserable. “Well, I guess I’ll have to take it,” he said gloomily. “A hundred bucks a week ain’t to be sniffed at.”

“What do you know about Audrey Sheridan?” I asked.

“More than most.” He brightened up. “What a pip of a dame! Seen her?”

I nodded. “Is it right the agency’s a flop?”

“That’s not her fault,” he said. “It’s just Cranville didn’t have any crime around until this business blew up. I don’t know how the old man kept things going.”

“Where does she get her money? She looks a million dollars to me and her joint’s better than a lobby in the Ritz-Plaza.”

“Her uncle out West passed in his pail and left her a slice of jack,” Reg explained. “She furnished the place and bought herself some clothes, hoping it’d be good for business. But business just isn’t here.”

I grunted. “She must be crazy,” I said. “It’s throwing money away. But she’s a nice looker, isn’t she?”

He eyed me kind of old-fashioned: “You’re a fast worker, ain’t you?” he said. “I’d take that lipstick off your mouth if I were you.”

I did so with a quick embarrassed wipe with my handkerchief. “I’m getting careless,” I muttered, not looking at him.

"I wouldn't mind a taste of that," he said, winking at me. "Yum-yum. Was it any good?"

A tap on the door interrupted an awkward moment.

Marian French put her head round the door. "What on earth do you think you're doing?" she exclaimed. "Why aren't you in bed?"

Reg Phipps stared at her with popping eyes. He sucked in his breath and gave a low whistle.

"Hello, Marian," I said. "Don't worry about me. I'm fine. There were things I had to do. Did you have a good time?"

She came further into the room. "You must be crazy to go around with a head like that," she scolded.

"I'd be still more crazy to go around without it," I returned with a grin. "I want you to meet Reg Phipps, editor of the Granville Gazette. Reg, this is Marian French, your new secretary."

Reg got to his feet and turned as red as a beet. "You wouldn't be kidding?" he said pleadingly.

I winked at Marian. "I told you he'd be all over you," I said.

"Gee, Miss French," Reg said, ignoring me. "This is terrific!

This is the biggest moment in my life! We'll get along fine."

Marian said she hoped they would and looked a little embarrassed. "Don't confuse the girl," I said. "You don't need to look as if you want to eat her."

Reg scowled at me. "Lay off, can't you?" he said. "Stop ribbing me." He turned back to Marian. "You'll be along tomorrow?"

She nodded. "I'm not so good at typing," she confessed, "but I'll get used to it if you'll have patience."

He drew in a deep breath. "You take your time," he assured her. "I'm in no hurry. Anything you want to know, just ask me."

"And be careful what you ask him," I said. "Where's Esslinger?"

"He dropped me and went on home," she returned, moving to the door. "I won't interrupt you now, but don't you think you ought to be

in bed?"

"I'm going," I lied. "Glad you had a good time. See you tomorrow."

Reg opened the door for her. "Good night, Miss French," he said, making eyes at her. "You don't know how I'm going to enjoy working with you."

Marian threw an amused glance at me, thanked Reg and left us.

"Like her?" I asked casually.

Reg closed his eyes. "That's the dame who haunts my dreams," he said. "Where did you find her?"

I told him.

He suddenly looked suspicious. "What's this stuff about Esslinger? Was she out with him?"

"She was."

"Gee! It gives me a pain the way Esslinger finds 'em," he growled. "That guy has every dame in Cranville running around with him."

"Well, what of it?" I asked, smiling at his annoyance. "Esslinger's a good-looking kid, bright, and he's a free spender . . . why shouldn't they run around with him?"

"I don't like the guy," Reg said. "He's pinched too many dames from me. He's only got to look at a dame and she flops for him."

"I used to be like that when I was his age," I grinned, going over to the bureau for the Scotch bottle. "All the other kids hated my guts too, but that didn't bring me out in a rash."

Reg sniffed and looked sour. "It doesn't bring him out in a rash either," he said.

I poured two fingers of Scotch into a glass. "You're too young to drink, aren't you?"

"Not when it's free," Reg returned with unnecessary eagerness.

"Maybe you'd better watch me," I said, sitting down again and swirling the amber coloured liquor round in the bottom of the glass. "You want a steady hand tonight. A lot depends on this picture." I

took a long drink, sighed and closed my eyes.

Reg got to his feet with a snort of disgust. "When do we go?" he demanded.

I squinted at him. "Maybe we'd better slide off now. We'll have to be careful Marian doesn't spot us. Looks like she wants to keep me in cottonwool." I finished the drink, lit another cigarette and stood up. "Okay?"

"Sure." Reg opened the door and looked into the passage. "No one around," he said, and together we went down the passage into the lobby.

Nora looked up from her magazine. "Don't you ever sleep?" she said to me as I went past.

"I have my moments," I said, waving to her. "Didn't I tell you I'm tough?"

"That doesn't prove anything," she said, with a sneer. "I know plenty guys who're tough, but where did it get them?"

"You tell me about it some other time," I said, not stopping. I followed Reg out into the dark, sweltering night.

We got into a battered Ford coupe and Reg drove away from the hotel. "Put that dame alongside Marian French," he said, "and what have you?"

"Get your mind off women for a moment," I urged. "We've got a job to do. How far is the morgue?"

"Four blocks and first on the right," he said, shouting to get above the roar of the car engine.

I looked at my watch in the light of a street lamp as we passed. It was eleven-thirty.

"Who's in charge?"

"Johnson does the night shift. No one else's likely to be there. Maybe we could bust in the back way unless you want to tell Johnson what you're going to do. But photographing corpses ain't permitted, so maybe we'd better go in the back way."

"What sort of a guy is Johnson?"

“Little geezer. We could take him without getting in a lather,” Reg said, slowing down as the traffic light changed to red. He stopped the car and we both lit cigarettes. “Breaking into a morgue isn’t my idea of fun,” he went on as he flipped the match out of the window.

I wasn’t looking forward to the job either, but I didn’t say so. My shirt clung to my back and chest and my head throbbed.

As the light changed Reg started the car rolling again. “Anyway,” he said, “it’ll be cold in the morgue. We might even freeze to death.”

“I hope to God we can get in without making a noise,” I said. “I don’t want any trouble with this Johnson guy. Even if he is a little guy it’s too, hot for fighting.”

“He won’t fight,” Reg said with a laugh. “He’d fall over if you spit in his eye.”

We turned right at the next corner and Reg parked the car under a street lamp.

“It’s only a hundred yards or so down the street,” he said, taking out his camera outfit and tucking it under his arm. “Better walk, huh?”

I stood on the sidewalk, feeling the heat of the brick pavement through my shoes. “Jeees!” I said. “It’s hot!”

We went down the street together, not saying anything and not hurrying. Reg paused after we had walked a while and nodded to a narrow alley, wide enough to take a car. “This is it,” he said, lowering his voice.

I glanced up and down the deserted street and then together we ducked down the alley. It was dark. There was a curious smell about the air: sweet, musty, sickish; a smell of slow decay.

“You could use this air as a bed,” I whispered to Reg. “I’ll come here for my next vacation.”

He giggled a little hysterically. “If you mean your last vacation,” he said, “you’ll come here whether you like it or not.”

We walked softly, keeping to the middle of the alley. The blackness around us was like an enveloping blanket and we couldn’t see anything, not even the sky.

“Creepy, isn’t it?” I said, feeling spooked. “It only wants someone to spring out on me and I’ll cry like a child.”

“Yeah? I’ll run,” Reg said with conviction. “Can’t you stop talking? You’re giving me the heebies.”

Then without warning a sudden high-pitched scream came to us out of the darkness. It swelled, cut through the thick stifling air like the sweep of a sickle, and died away in a horrible, slobbering gurgle.

We stood still and clutched each other.

“What in hell’s that?” I said, feeling the hair stiffen on the nape of my neck.

I heard Reg breathing like a badly winded horse. My own heart was going thump, thump, thump.

“There’s a psychopathic hospital over that way,” he said in a breathless, uneven voice. “Maybe it’s one of the nuts letting off a little steam.”

I took off my hat and wiped my face and the back of my neck with a damp handkerchief. “I hope to God she doesn’t let off another like that,” I said fervently. “That nearly ruined me.”

We stood listening and then, hearing nothing except the faint roar of distant traffic, we walked on. The alley curved to our right and turning the bend we saw ahead a red light burning faintly over a double door.

“That’s where we go in,” Reg whispered, pointing. “Inside is the receiving room.”

“Maybe I’d better go first and take a look around,” I said. “Then I’ll come back for you.”

“Leave me alone?” Reg said. “Not damn likely! My legs wouldn’t let me stay here a second after you’ve gone.”

I considered this. “Okay,” I said, understanding how he was feeling, “but for the love of Mike don’t make a noise.”

We went forward together until we reached the double door. There was a cement runway, instead of step, leading up to the door for the wheeled hospital tables to run up.

“Take it easy,” I said, and turned the doorknob. The door was locked.

I took out my flashlight and examined the lock. “It’s easy,” I said. “Hold the light while I fix it.”

I took out my penknife, inserted one of the hickies and levered. The lock snicked back and I pushed the door open.

“I’ll get you to open my kid sister’s money-box,” Reg said. “You’re good.”

I waved him to silence and stood in the half-open doorway, listening. There was no sound of activity, so I put on the flashlight and let the beam run around.

The room was chill and very clean. Hospital tables stood in a line against the wall and two white cupboards completed the furnishing.

We entered the room, closed the double door softly and went on to another door opposite us. Again we listened and heard nothing. The silence was oppressive, but the room was refreshingly cool after the stifling alley.

I opened the door and again looked into a darkened room, which smelt strongly of antiseptics. I put on my flashlight.

Reg said, “This is the post-mortem room,” and peered curiously over my shoulder.

The room was bare. An operating table under a battery of lights stood in the centre of the room and two cases filled with stainless steel instruments were near the table.

“Where do we go now?” I asked, switching on the lights.

Reg blinked around. “There’s a passage somewhere that leads to the morgue,” he said. “It’s some time since I’ve been here.” He crossed the room to another door and peeped round it. Then he jerked his head. “Here we are,” he said.

I followed him into a passage lit by dim blue lights. It was much colder in the passage and my teeth began to chatter with nerves.

At the end of the passage was a flight of stairs leading down to the basement and leading up to the next floor.

Keeping his voice to a murmur, Reg said, “Johnson’s got an office up

there,” and jerked his thumb to the stairs.

“We go down?”

He nodded. “Spooky, ain’t it?”

We descended the stairs. The air became moist as we neared the bottom and there was a musty smell of decomposition.

“Like the breath of a crocodile,” Reg whispered.

I pressed against a heavy steel door which swung open. A sharp, sweet antiseptic smell of formaldehyde stung the back of my throat and icy air turned my shirt into a clammy cold plaster. I pushed a row of electric-light buttons on the cement wall and the steel door shut with a muffled thud.

“We’re in,” I said, staring round at the two long rows of black metal cabinets where the bodies were stored.

Reg stood looking around too. His face was the colour of a fish’s underbelly and his knees were visibly trembling.

“The sooner we get out of this, the better I’ll like it,” he said, setting his camera down on a nearby bench. “Suppose you dig around for Stonewall Dixon?”

I looked at the row of cabinets. “I can’t think of anything nicer than wading through a pile of stiffs on a night like this,” I said, with a grimace.

“Call him,” Reg said sarcastically, sitting on the bench and pressing his trembling knees together. “Maybe he’ll push open his box and wave to you.”

“You’re getting hysterical,” I said, feeling in my hip pocket for my flask.

His eyes brightened. “I am hysterical,” he said, reaching out an eager hand as I took out a half-pint flask of whisky.

“You wait a second,” I said, unscrewing the cap. I was surprised to see that my own hand was unsteady. “Maybe I need this more than you.” As I put the flask to my lips the gurgling scream came again. It sounded even more spooky in this room than it did in the alley. I spluttered, losing some of the whisky.

“Don’t give it all to your shirt,” Reg said, his face now blue-white and his eyes popping.

I steadied myself, belted the whisky again and then gave it to him. The way he anchored his mouth to the flask was something to see.

While he was working on the whisky I examined the cabinets. Each had a small label attached to it bearing a name. After a while I located Dixon’s cabinet.

“Here he is,” I said, turning back to Reg.

“Well, well,” he said, waving the now empty flask. “How is the old stiff? Let’s give him a drink.”

I snatched the flask from him. “If I could get tight as fast as you I’d save myself some money.”

Reg rose unsteadily to his feet. “Don’t you worry about me,” he said with a giggle.

I pulled open the cabinet and looked down at Dixon. He still looked pretty horrible. “Take a look at him,” I said. “He’ll sober you up.”

Reg looked and it did. “The poor old geezer,” he said, closing his eyes. “The poor, lonely old geezer.”

“Never mind the obituary notice. Get started.”

Reg reached for his camera, pulled it from its case and screwed in a flash bulb. Then he suddenly caught his breath and his eyes popped. He was looking at something behind me and I turned, my flesh creeping.

The steel door was slowly opening.

We both jumped different ways. Reg towards Dixon and I towards the door.

I had started a shade too late. Jeff Gordan snaked into the room, a gun in his hand and a frightened, vicious look on his face. My jump was still taking me towards him and I couldn’t stop myself, so I kicked out blindly. It was a lucky kick. It caught his right wrist and the gun fell from his hand. I cannoned into him and we sprawled on ground.

“Get that picture!” I yelled to Reg. “I’ll hold this swine.”

In actual fact, Jeff was holding me. His great arms encircled my ribs and he was putting on a hell of a squeeze.

“Get onto him!” Reg shouted excitedly. “Beat his brains out!”

I was hanging on all right, but it wasn’t doing me any good. I had only one free arm. My right was pinned to my side by Jeff’s bear-like hug. I slammed at his apish face with my left and then he rolled on top of me, nearly crushing me flat. I grabbed hold of his ear and began screwing it round while he tried to butt my chin with the top of his head.

I knew from a sudden blinding flash that Reg had taken the picture. A moment later he came rushing across to where we were wrestling and jammed the camera-case over Jeff’s head.

As Jeff was roaring and striking blindly at me I managed to wriggle clear. But he caught my leg and pinned me as I was getting to my feet. I went over and landed near the gun.

“Get the hell outa here,” I panted to Reg. “I can fix him, but get that camera away.”

Reg bolted out of the door. He knew how important that picture was and he was smart enough not to worry about me.

I belted Jeff over the head with the gun. I remembered how he had handled Audrey Sheridan and how he had roughed me around, so I put a lot of steam into the wallop. He went limp.

I dragged the camera-case off his head, rolled him on his back and made sure that he was out, then I legged it down the passage. There was no sign of anyone and no sound of activity. It looked like Starkey had considered Jeff big enough to handle the morgue on his own.

I shot through the post-mortem room and the receiving-room and stumbled out into the dark alley. The hot air and the musty smell hit me like a slap in the face after the cold of the morgue. There was another smell that hadn’t been there before.

The faint smell of lilac.

I stopped short and sniffed again. It was lilac all right. I called to Reg.

He made an odd growling noise that came from almost at my feet and I turned on my flashlight. He was sitting against the wall, a dazed,

blank look on his face.

“She’s got the camera,” he said, struggling to sit up.

Then I did get mad. “What do you mean?” I snarled at him. “Who got what?”

“Some dame . . . as I came out, she grabbed me—”

“You let some dame take that camera?” I said, hardly believing my ears.

“She stuck her hip into me and I hit the wall—” he began, but that was enough for me.

“The little smarty!” I said violently. “That’s the redhead . . . Audrey Sheridan, Cranville’s pet dick! She’s pinched every damn clue I’ve found up to now and I’ve had enough of it. Come on, don’t sit there like a stuffed duck, let’s go.”

He crawled to his feet. “It could be her,” he said miserably, as he tagged along behind me. “That jiu-jitsu stuff got me on the wrong foot.”

“It got me on the wrong foot too,” I said grimly, “but this is the last time she pulls a fast one on me. After I’m through with her she’ll be taking her meals off the mantelpiece.”

We reached the Ford coupe and bundled in.

“Where now?” Reg asked, starting the engine.

“Where do you think? We’re going to call on Miss Strangler Lewis and I’m getting that camera back!”

As he pulled away from the kerb the crazy woman let off another gurgling scream.

“If you think that’s anything like a noise, you wait until I’ve got my mitts on that little smarty-pants,” I said savagely. “Get moving, can’t you.”

I think I’m going to enjoy this,” Reg said, and shoved his foot on the accelerator.

chapter five

I wasted two valuable days hunting Audrey Sheridan, but I didn't find her. When I broke into her apartment I discovered her toilet things, some clothes and a fair-sized bag I'd noticed previously had disappeared. It looked as she had decided to duck out of sight.

While I was searching around for her, Wolf had taken over the Granville Gazette. I had to leave him to it, and Reg reported that he was reorganizing the place in a big way. There was nothing I could do with the Gazette until I had found the picture of Dixon's body. And it didn't look like I was going to find it.

I was sore as hell about the whole thing. The worst of it was Starkey thought I had the photograph. I knew he would go all out to stop me using it and I was walking around town like a trapeze artist using frayed ropes. Any minute I expected someone to shoot me.

Most of my time was spent either watching Audrey's apartment or her office.

At the end of the second day I had come to the conclusion that she had either left town or else had hidden herself away in some foxhole only she knew about. For the past forty-eight hours I had kept in touch with Ted Esslinger, but he had no idea where she was or where she was likely to be hiding.

It did cross my mind that she might have been kidnapped, but the fact that she had packed a bag and also had the photograph, which in itself was dynamite, seemed to me to be sufficient reason for her to duck out of sight. She would know that I'd do everything to get the picture back and she wasn't likely to take any chance of running into me.

Starkey showed his hand on the night of the second day after Reg and I had visited the morgue.

I had spent the previous night watching Audrey's apartment and I was feeling pretty low. I returned to the Eastern Hotel, went immediately to my bedroom and flopped into a bath.

One of Starkey's thugs tossed four inches of lead piping filled with

T.N.T. through my bedroom window and wrecked the room. If I hadn't been in the bath I would have been by now a nasty stain on the wall. As it was, I had half the bathroom ceiling on my head.

I staggered out of the bath, grabbed a towel that was half buried under plaster and went into my bedroom.

A large hole was blown in the outside wall, the ceiling was down and the door was hanging drunkenly on one hinge. The furnishing of the room was wrecked.

That was enough for me. As soon as I got rid of the police, and they in turn had got rid of the rubbernecks, I packed what was left of my clothes and demanded my hotel check.

While the night clerk was making it out, Nora came down the stairs. She looked at me with a cynical, amused look in her eyes.

"Hello, tough guy," she said, draping herself over the banisters. "Pulling out?"

"You bet," I said, acting like I was scared. "I've had all I can take from this burg."

She sneered in an amused kind of way. "Don't go far," she said. "We haven't yet got around to spending that dough of yours."

"When guys start throwing pineapples at me," I told her, "I know it's time to quit. I'm going back to New York. I'm all for the quiet peaceful life in the backwaters of Broadway."

She shook her head. "You don't kid me," she said. "You ain't leaving town—not a big, tough guy like you."

"I am," I insisted. "You want to see what that bomb did to my room."

She and the night clerk exchanged glances.

"When you're this way again, look in," she said. "Maybe they'll aim better next time."

"Yeah, that's what scares me," I said, paying my check. "So long, babe. Mind no one trips over your chest," and I went cautiously across the lobby to the verandah.

There were two cops standing outside the hotel and a bunch of people across the way gaped at the hole in my bedroom wall. I gave one of

the cops a buck to get me a taxi. I wasn't showing myself on the street longer than necessary.

"Where to, boss?" the driver asked as he pulled in to the kerb.

"The station," I said for the benefit of the cops and anyone else who might be interested, and I climbed into the cab.

The two cops were grinning broadly. The one I'd given the buck to stuck his head through the cab window. "Don't you like this town no more?" he asked, showing his yellow teeth.

I said I didn't and called to the driver to get going.

Halfway down Main Street I told him I'd changed my mind. "Make it the Granville Gazette," I said.

A few minutes' fast driving convinced me that he wasn't taking me there.

We were going away from the business centre of the town.

"What the hell are you playing at?" I yelled to him. "I said the Granville Gazette."

"I heard you the first time, bud," he returned soothingly. "They moved into new offices this morning."

I grunted and sat back. As I hadn't seen Reg since yesterday morning I didn't know what Wolf had been doing. I thought it was a good idea to move the Gazette from its present down-at-the-heel district. If Wolf was going to make anything of the rag, smarter offices were essential.

The offices were smart all right. I found the Gazette on the eighth floor of a large modern block on the far side of Cranville, away from the smelting works and the dirt and smoke.

I pushed open the pebbled glass door on which was traced in chalk the name of the paper. I thought absently that by the time the gilt letters were put on it would look all right.

They were all there: Wolf, Marian and Reg. There was also a lean bird with a thin hatchet face and an eyebrow moustache who was sitting on the corner of one of the desks. I hadn't seen him before.

"Where the hell have you been?" Wolf growled at me as soon as I walked in.

I put my bag down. "On the job," I said, flopping into a chair and smiling at Marian. "Anyone got any liquor?"

They all ignored this.

"Did you find her?" Reg asked anxiously.

"Did I hell!" I said, setting fire to a cigarette. "She's skipped or is hiding out somewhere. What a hell of a place this is! I seem to spend all my time hunting for missing dames."

Wolf glared at me. "And you haven't turned one up yet," he said. "Now look here, young man——"

"Skip it," I said, matching his glare. "I'm not in the mood to take anything from you nor anyone else tonight. I want some sleep. Ten minutes ago someone threw a bomb at me and I'm a little jittery."

They all reacted to that.

Marian said anxiously: "A bomb? You're not hurt?"

The lean bird on the desk suddenly woke out of his trance. "What do you mean—a bomb?" he demanded. "Where?"

I gave them the story.

Reg was on his feet before I had finished. He grabbed his camera. "Come on," he said to the lean bird. "This is news."

They nearly fell over each other getting out of the room.

I stared after them blankly and then turned to Marian. "Who's the guy with the hard eye?"

"Ned Latimer," she said, looking at me anxiously. "He's working for the Gazette. Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yeah, I'm all right," I said, relaxing once more in the armchair. "But how long I'm remaining that way certainly worries me."

Wolf was lighting a cigar. He still glared at me. "What I want to know —" he began, but again I cut in on him.

"It's time you and I had a little talk," I said. "Stick around for a minute." I turned to Marian. "Look, sweetheart," I said, "it's getting late, hadn't you better go home?"

"I'm going now," she said. "But what are you doing? I mean where will you sleep?"

"This chair suits me," I returned without enthusiasm. "I'll find some place tomorrow."

"There's a bed in one of the other offices," she said, getting up. "I'll fix it for you."

I said that would be swell, and picking up my bag I followed her out of the main office into a short passage which led to three other rooms.

"Setting up in style," I said as she opened a door and turned on the light. While we were fixing the cupboard bed I asked her how she liked her new job. "Wolf doesn't worry you, does he?"

She said they were all sweet to her and she liked it very much. "I moved out of the Eastern Hotel this morning," she told me. "I've got a room in an apartment house just across the way. It's cheaper and more convenient and away from the smell of smoke."

I said I betted Reg was tickled pink to have her work with him and she said he was.

"He's only a kid," she said, putting the finishing touches to the bed, "but he's cute. There, you'll sleep all right now. Perhaps I could get you fixed up at my apartment house. Would you like that?"

"Leave it for tonight," I said. "It depends how badly Starkey wants to make trouble. It might be an idea for me to duck out of sight as Audrey's done. I don't want any more bombs thrown at me."

We went back to the main office. Wolf still sat smoking his cigar and brooding. He said: "Don't keep me here all night. I've got other things to do than waste my time hanging around for you."

Marian put on her hat and picked up her handbag. "Good night," she said to me, and, smiling at Wolf, she left the office.

Wolf rolled his cigar wetly between his lips and stared after her. "Nice girl," he grunted. "Efficient too."

I sat down and lit a cigarette. "You stick to Miss Wilson," I returned coldly. "She's more in your line."

He eyed me balefully. "What do you want to talk about?" he said.

"I've never met such a fellow for talking. Why the hell don't you do something?"

"Maybe you don't know what I have done," I said, stretching out my legs and yawning. "Let me run over it with you."

I gave him the whole works. It didn't sound half as bad as it really was.

"Now you see what I'm up against," I concluded. "Everyone's working against each other and consequently we're getting nowhere. Even if I did get the picture of Dixon's body, I doubt if I could pin the killing on Starkey. All I could do would be to make trouble for Macey—not that that wouldn't be a bad thing."

Wolf tugged at his underlip. "So Starkey is at the bottom of it," he said. "Pin Dixon's killing on him and he would be out of the running. Yeah, that's what you have to do. Never mind about these missing girls. Go after Starkey. Get the picture and dig up some evidence that'll fix him. Esslinger and I can fight the election by ourselves. I'm not scared of Esslinger."

"How about the girls?" I asked, watching him thoughtfully.

"When Starkey's in jail," Wolf snapped, "they'll come out of hiding. It sticks out a mile that they're working with him."

I shook my head. "I don't think so. He or someone else has either kidnapped them or killed them."

"To hell with them, anyway!" Wolf said. "You go after Starkey. The best thing to hit him with is Dixon's killing."

"Maybe it is," I returned, "but I wasn't hired to start trouble for Starkey. I was hired to find the girls."

His eyes snapped angrily. "You were hired to work for me!" he said. "And so long as I pay you, you'll do what I tell you."

I shook my head. "You're on the wrong foot," I told him. "If you want me to go after Starkey, you'll have to hire me all over again."

He sank deeper into his chair and his eyes narrowed. "So that's it?" he said, his voice cold with rage. "You're trying to hold me up?"

"Call it what you like," I returned indifferently, "but I'm not taking on

anything as tough as this unless you make it worth my while. I can go back to New York, work on a new case and know, when I get up in the morning, I won't have a pair of wings to take to the shower with me. This job's different. Any moment I may start playing a harp. And if I do go after Starkey it's going to be just too bad if I slip up. Macey won't do anything, you won't do anything, and Esslinger will be only too pleased to sell me a shroud."

He chewed on his cigar while he turned this over in his mind. "You can go to hell," he said at last. "I'll get Colonel Forsberg to send me someone else."

I grinned at him. "Be your age," I said. "Colonel Forsberg runs a detective agency. He doesn't touch this kind of racket. If he knew what was going on he'd shoot your money back and call me off. If you don't believe me, ask him and see."

I stubbed out my cigarette and pointed a finger at him. "If you want Starkey, you can have him but you'll have to pay and you'll have to give me a free hand. Do that and I'll get him."

"How?" Wolf asked, his eyes brooding.

"Never mind how," I returned. "I can get him all right. If you want Starkey fixed, say so and I'll do it."

"There's something about you I don't like," Wolf growled. "You're too smooth, too much of a talker. What are you playing at?"

I grinned at him. "Maybe I do talk too much, but I don't give much away."

He tapped ash into a brass bowl on the desk. "What'll it cost?"

"Five grand will take care of it," I said. "For that amount of dough I'll give you Starkey in a week."

He shook his round, close-cropped head. "Too much," he said. "Half would be too much."

"Depends how you look at it," I pointed out. "That's the value I put on my life. If Starkey beats me to it I want something to decorate my will with."

"Two thousand dollars and a free hand," he offered, "and that's final."

I saw it was. “Okay,” I said. “You’re getting a bargain, but I was always a sucker for starting trouble. Give me a cheque and I’ll start tomorrow.”

“When you’ve fixed Starkey,” Wolf said curtly.

I shook ray head. “No, money now or I’ll throw my hand in. You can’t have it both ways.”

He eyed me and decided it would be a waste of time to argue. He took out his chequebook, slashed across it with fat ugly handwriting and tossed the slip of paper across the desk.

I picked it up, glanced at it and put it carefully in my pocket. “You said a free hand,” I reminded him.

“What of it?”

“That means you keep away from the Gazette, “ I told him. “ There’s only one way to drag Starkey off his saddle, and you can’t afford to be mixed up in it.”

He drummed on the desk. “What are you up to?” he asked, suspicion and doubt in his eyes.

“The less you know about this the better,” I said. “I want you to keep away from here. If at the end of seven days Starkey is still out of jail, then you’ll get your money back. That’s all you’ve got to worry about. Fixing Starkey’s my business, but I’ll need the Gazette to do it, and unless you want someone to throw a bomb at you you’d better keep clear of it.”

He got to his-feet. “Seven days,” he said. “If you haven’t done something in seven days, you’ll get the hell out of here and you’ll give me back my money. Understand?”

“Sure,” I said, yawning. “Now maybe you’ll let me go to bed.” He gave me a long thoughtful stare and went out, closing the door behind him.

* * *

At ten o’clock the next morning I was seated behind an impressive-looking desk in the office that Wolf had reserved for himself.

Marian, Reg and Latimer were with me. Marian sat on a chair by my desk.

Reg sat near her and Latimer propped himself up against the wall by the window.

"I don't know how you guys feel about this," I said, pushing back my chair so I could rest my feet on the desk, "but I've got a free hand for seven days and in that time I'm going to bust this case or know the reason why. Maybe you don't want to be mixed up in it. All you'll get out of it is a front-row seat and a scoop that ought to put the Gazette in the gravy for the rest of its days. It may be tough going. It probably will be tough going, but you'll be doing something that'll benefit the town. It depends how you feel about it."

They looked at me expectantly. "What have we got to do?" Reg asked. "You can count me in so long as I know what's wanted."

"We've got to pry the lid off this town," I said. "We can do it easily enough, but that's only the beginning of it. We have to find Audrey Sheridan and get that photograph off her. With that we'll try to pin Dixon's murder on Starkey's mob. By that time things ought to start popping, and it's when things are popping I hope we'll turn up these missing girls. I'm keeping out of sight for a day or so, but there are things you can do if you want to. For instance, I want to know if Dixon's body has been removed from the morgue and whether it's been taken to. Esslinger's. Then I want to know what the police are doing about Mary Drake." I looked across at Latimer. "You could do that. See Macey and interview him. Let him think you're on his side, but get anything useful out of him." I turned to Marian. "See Ted Esslinger. He ought to know if Audrey's been in touch with his father. After all, she can't ignore her client forever. I want to find her badly. I want a line on Edna Wilson. There's something phoney about her." I paused to light a cigarette. "And I want to know where Jeff Gordan was on the night Dixon was killed."

Reg said: "Okay, we'll handle it." He looked at Latimer, who nodded.

"How about the Gazette?" I asked. "Can you fit all this in and run the Gazette at the same time?"

"The bulk of the copy is syndicated features and news," Rex explained. "The stuff goes straight to the printing shop and the news editor handles it on the spot. We just cover the local news from here. We can do that all right."

“Off you go then,” I said. “Marian covers Esslinger and Edna Wilson. Reg checks on Dixon’s funeral and Audrey. You,” to Latimer, “see Macey. Dig into it. I want action now and I’m going to get it. We’ll meet here at seven o’clock and see what you’ve got.”

They said they would do that.

“If anything breaks, get me on the telephone. I’ll be here all day. If any of you see Audrey, hang on to her and as soon as you’ve run her to ground give me a call. I want that dame more than anybody.”

When they had gone I wrote another report to Colonel Forsberg. Every operative who worked for the Colonel had to turn in a daily report. The idea was sound, as it showed the operative what progress he was making and also it helped to clear up points he might have otherwise overlooked.

After I had read the report through, one particular thing struck me — the Street-Camera angle was a phoney.

I lit a cigarette and brooded about it. The more I brooded the more phoney it became. I had no idea how Starkey was selecting the girl to be kidnapped—always assuming that he was responsible for the kidnapping. If he was responsible, then in theory the idea of getting one of his gang to take the girl’s photograph and give her an address to collect it and then kidnap her when she arrived was a good one. But good only in theory. The girl might not bother to collect the photograph. That was one obvious point. If she did and she was kidnapped, how did they get her away from the building? Why was the picture of Mary Drake exhibited in the window on the day she was kidnapped? Something was wrong with this theory, but I couldn’t get at it.

I finally gave up in disgust and spent the rest of the morning lying on my bed, dozing and thinking. It was no use showing myself on the streets, I argued. If Macey and Starkey thought I had left town I might be able to spring a surprise on them. What kind of surprise it would be I had no idea, but it seemed to me as I dozed off that any kind of surprise was something.

I woke to find Reg bending over me, a look of irritation on his worldly-wise young face.

I blinked, yawned and sat up. "Don't think I was asleep," I said, swinging my legs off the bed and running my fingers through my hair. "That's just the way I think. I've been doing a lot of thinking since you've been away."

"I bet you have," he said sarcastically. "And I've been tramping my feet down to my knees."

I looked at my watch. It was just after three o'clock. "Hell!" I said, startled.

"I didn't know it was as late as this. I haven't had any lunch."

"Never mind about your lunch," Reg returned. "I've got news."

"Sit down and tell me," I said, picking up the telephone. I called a drugstore across the street.

"Audrey Sheridan's in town," he said. "I've just seen her."

"What are you doing here then?" I said, looking at him sharply. "Why didn't you tail her?" Before he could reply the drugstore came on the line and I ordered sandwiches and a half pint of bourbon. "Go on," I said, as I hung up.

"I didn't have a chance," he returned in disgust. "She was in a taxi. It was moving fast and she looked out of the window as it passed me. By the time I'd found a cab she was out of sight. I cruised around looking for her, but it was hopeless. She was going too fast."

I lit a cigarette and went over to the desk. "Well, I guess it's something to know she's still around. If Starkey knows she has the photograph, her life won't be worth a dime."

"That goes for you too," Reg said, sitting down in an armchair and resting his feet on the bed.

"Yeah, only my life's worth a lot more than a dime to me," I reminded him.

"What else did you find out? How about Dixon?"

"Can't you guess?" Reg said. "The old story. Esslinger sent a hearse for it, the hearse caught fire and all that's left of Dixon is a handful of

ashes and a few charred bones. I'd have been in sooner only I had to go over to the printing shop and get the news on the front page. No one knows how the fire started. The hearse suddenly went up like a furnace. The driver was lucky enough to get out with a whole skin."

I grunted. "Clever," I said. "Yeah, that was smart. It makes the picture all the more important to me as well as Starkey. Once the picture's destroyed it lets Starkey out."

"We ain't sure Starkey did kill Dixon, are we?" Reg asked.

"Near enough," I returned. "Either he or Jeff must have killed him. There's something I can't figure out about the Street-Camera Studio. It might be someone was trying to frame the kidnappings on to Starkey. Dixon had those photographs, don't forget. Suppose he -was putting a squeeze on Starkey?"

Reg looked puzzled. "What sort of squeeze?"

"I don't know. If I knew that I'd be getting somewhere. But suppose Dixon was blackmailing Starkey about the photographs, wouldn't that be motive enough for Starkey or one of his mob to kill him?"

"Yeah, I suppose it would," Reg said doubtfully. "I don't think you're on it yet. Maybe you're nearly there, but I don't think it's right."

"I know," I said, scratching my head, "but I'll get around to it. Suppose you go over to Esslinger's and see if you can pick up Marian? Tell her you've seen Audrey. She might run into her."

Reg said he'd do that and took himself off.

A few minutes later a boy came with the sandwiches and the bourbon and I settled down to eat.

Except for a few telephone calls from people I didn't know the rest of the afternoon passed peacefully enough. I smoked, finished the bourbon and generally idled the time away. I had no idea what I was going to do when it got dark, but I knew I would have to do something. It depended on what the others brought in.

Just before seven o'clock Reg and Latimer arrived. I was sitting at the desk as they came into the office.

"Gee!" Reg said. "I thought I'd find you still asleep."

“That’s only because I’m setting a good example,” I said, waving them to chairs. “Where’s Marian?”

“She’ll be along,” Latimer said, swinging his legs over the arm of the chair and lighting a cigarette. “Nice dame that. I could go for her in a big way if she thought along the same lines as I do.”

Reg scowled at him. “Lay off, you lug,” he said fiercely. “She’s my secretary, and I don’t stand for bums horning in.”

“Skip it, you two,” I said. “Let’s hear what Latimer’s got to report.”

He shook his head. “Not much. I saw Macey. He fed me the same old bull. The police expect to turn up the missing girls any minute now. I could tell by the way he said it he was lying. He now admits that there is a kidnapper at work and says that Wolf s at the bottom of it trying to stir up trouble for his department.”

“He didn’t?”

Latimer nodded. “Yeah, but he thought I was his pal, otherwise he wouldn’t have said it.”

“Tomorrow we’ll spread that right across the front page. ‘Police Chief Says Industrial Magnate Faked Kidnapping’. ‘Missing girls expected to be found today’,” I said, looking at Reg. “Then we’ll quote Macey just as he said it to Latimer. If that doesn’t start something, I give up.”

Latimer scratched his head. “I don’t know what he’ll do to me,” he said mournfully, “but if that’s the way you want to play it, it’s okay with me.”

I turned to Reg. “Get something out along those lines and see what it looks like. Snap to it, brother.”

Reg went into the outer office and a moment or so later I could hear the whir of a typewriter.

“Anything on Jeff Gordan?” I asked Latimer.

“He was playing poker at Lefty’s until one o’clock,” he told me, “and then he went home. No one went with him and he would have to pass the old Cranville Gazette building on his way.”

“Looks like he hasn’t much of an alibi. Dixon was knocked off around two o’clock. You don’t know where Starkey was at that time?”

Latimer shook his head. "I could find out," he said. "It might be worth checking."

"You do that," I said, glancing at my watch. It was now half past seven. "Where the devil has Marian got to?"

"Maybe she's found something," Latimer said, getting to his feet. "Well, if you don't want me anymore I'll get off. I've got a dame to meet, and after I've fed her I'll try Lefty's again and see if I can pick up anything on Starkey."

"Don't tip your mitt," I said. "I want to surprise that punk."

"I'll watch it," Latimer returned, and went off.

I wandered into the outer office and checked through Reg's story. We worked on it for a while and then I sat back with a satisfied grunt.

"I guess that's about right," I said. "This'll give Macey a hell of a headache and maybe Wolf will sue him for libel."

"Macey'll deny it," Reg said, shaking his head. "I don't like this idea, pal. It's a bad story. If Macey and Wolf both go for us, we'll be closed down."

I grinned. "Be your age," I said. "Wolf owns the damn rag. He's got a stack of dough. Suppose Macey does sue, it won't hurt Wolf much but it'll do a hell of a lot of good."

Reg began to grin. "Yeah," he said. "It might at that. Well, you're handling this. If you think it's okay, I'll get down to the printer with it."

"Sure it's okay," I said. "Take it down now."

He suddenly looked up from putting the folded sheets into an envelope.

"Where's Marian?" he said. "Look at the time; it's after eight o'clock."

We looked at each other and we both saw we were thinking the same thing.

"She'll be along," I said uneasily. "Maybe she went home to change. You know what girls are."

"Maybe she has," he said, but neither of us felt any happier about it.

I looked at the telephone. "Know her number?"

Reg went over and dialled. We waited while the bell rang. Then he hung up.

"No one there," he said.

"Maybe she's on her way over," I said, crossing to the window and looking down the street. "That the apartment house on the corner, isn't it?"

Reg joined me. "Yeah," he said. "But I don't see her." He was looking scared. "You don't think—?"

"No, I don't," I said shortly. "Now look, Reg, get that copy over to the printers. I'll go over to the apartment house and find out if she's been in. Come back here as soon as you can. I'll be waiting for you."

He hesitated and then picked up the envelope. "I'll try not to be long," he said. "I'd better see this through, though, and it'll take an hour."

"I'll ring you then," I said. "Put your number on a piece of paper, and as soon as I find her I'll call you."

I could see he hated going, but after writing the number down, he went.

The telephone began to ring as I was turning to the door. I went back and picked up the receiver.

It was Ted Esslinger. "Is Miss French there?" he asked.

"No," I said. "I'm waiting for her now. Why are you calling?"

"Is that Mr. Spewack?" He sounded surprised. "I heard you'd left town."

"Don't believe all you hear," I said shortly. "Why are you wanting Marian?"

"She had a date with me at eight-fifteen," he said. "I was wondering if she were held up or something."

I began to feel uneasy. "Sorry, bud," I snapped. "I haven't seen her," and I hung up.

It took me under four minutes to reach Marian's apartment house. I

rang the bell and a small, bird-like woman opened the door. She looked at me inquiringly.

“Miss French?” I said.

Her face brightened. “She’s not in,” she told me, “but she shouldn’t be long. Will you wait?”

I introduced myself. “Maybe she’s mentioned me,” I said, seeing Marian was popular with the woman.

“I’m Mrs. Sinclair,” the woman said, smiling at me. “Of course she’s mentioned you. Please come in.”

I followed her into a large, comfortably furnished room. “What a charming girl she is!” Mrs. Sinclair went on. “Such a nice, unspoilt, clever person, and so enthusiastic about her new work. Fancy Mr. Wolf taking over the Gazette. Do you think he’ll alter the paper in any way? I’ve grown so used to having it now, and sometimes changes...”

“Excuse me, Mrs. Sinclair,” I broke in, “I’m a little worried about Miss French. You see, we’d arranged to meet at seven o’clock and she hasn’t turned up. She didn’t leave a message, did she?”

Mrs. Sinclair looked at me sharply. “Why, no,” she said. “She came in about five o’clock. I heard her telephone ring a few minutes later and then she went out again. She didn’t say where she was going.”

“Do you mind if I go up to her room?” I asked. “I wouldn’t ask this, only it’s important.”

“I don’t think,” she began, looking bewildered and puzzled.

“Already four girls are missing in this town,” I said, surprised to hear how harsh my voice sounded. “I don’t want her to be the fifth.”

She went white. “You don’t mean that,” she said, putting her hand on my arm. “You don’t really...”

“Take me to her room,” I said. “I don’t know what’s happened to her, but I’m going to find out.”

We went up the stairs. On the second floor, she took me along a passage and unlocked a door at the far end. I went into a large bright room with flowers on the table and gay-coloured rugs and curtains.

I stood looking around the room. Then I went over to the telephone.

There was a pad of paper by the telephone and I picked it up. The sheet of paper was blank, but by holding it at an angle I could make out some markings on it. Marian had written something and torn a sheet off, leaving the impression on the sheet I was looking at. I tore off the sheet and held it to the light. I could just make out: 37 Victoria Drive.

"Know where Victoria Drive is?" I asked Mrs. Sinclair, who stood anxiously watching me.

"It's the other side of the town before you come to the smelting works. You go down Main Street and keep on to the last of the traffic lights, then you turn right and Victoria Drive is the last turning on the left."

"Thanks," I said, and put the sheet of paper in my pocket. "I guess that's all."

"I'm so worried," she began. "Hadn't we better tell the police?"

I said no, the police hadn't done anything in the past and I couldn't see them doing anything now. "Leave this to me," I said. "I'll find her."

As I turned to leave the room I took one more quick look around, and then I paused. "Isn't that her bag?" I said, going over to an armchair and picking up a smart black and white handbag lying partly concealed by a cushion.

"I wonder why she didn't take it with her?" Mrs. Sinclair was saying as I opened the bag.

I didn't hear what else she said because the first thing I saw in the bag was a blue ticket. I knew what it was before I took it from the bag and examined it.

Printed on one side of it was the following message:

You have just been photographed.

Call this afternoon for a free specimen photograph.

Six photographs - 50 cents.

Beautiful Enlargements mounted and ready to mail: \$1.50 each.

THE STREET-CAMERA STUDIO

* * *

It was growing dark by the time I reached Victoria Drive. I paid off the taxi at the corner and walked casually down the street, noting the number of each house as I passed. Far ahead a lone streetlight burned. Warmer lights dotted the night on either side where houses were spaced half a dozen to a block.

I kept on counting the numbers . . . 29, 31, 33, 35 . . . and then I stopped in front of a house which was half hidden by an overgrown hedge. On one of the gateposts a 3 and a 7 of pale metal caught what light there was. A square white card was nailed to one of the posts. Putting my face close to the card, I could see that it was a Sale or Rent sign.

I pushed open the gate and went up the cement walk to the house. I stood still on the walk at the foot of the porch steps for a long moment. My heart was thumping uneasily and I had the kind of sickish feeling one has when one is going to have a tooth drawn. No sound came from the house, which was dark except for another pale square card nailed on its door.

I moved silently to the door and listened. I could hear nothing. I went to a window and then to another. I tried both windows and the door. They were all locked.

I stood there wondering what to do. Had Marian come to this empty, lonely-looking house? Had she entered or had she gone away when she found no one was living in it? I wasn't taking any chances. I had to get in and see for myself.

I fiddled with one of the windows and slipped back the catch. The window went up slowly with my push and didn't make much noise doing it. I peered into the darkness and smelt the dank, musty smell of a room that hadn't been occupied for a long time.

With my gun in my right fist I stepped over the sill, down into the room. The bare boards creaked under my weight and the air in the room stifled me.

A full minute of breathless listening got me nothing. Holding my gun ahead of my body, I began exploring the joint. Nothing but the floor came under my feet as I edged my way forward. My groping left hand felt nothing until it touched a wall from which hung strips of wallpaper which rustled under my fingers. I seemed to have crossed a room that was empty.

I moved along the wall, hunting for a door. Half a dozen of my undersized steps brought me to one. I leaned against it, listened and heard nothing.

I found the knob, turned it softly and eased the door back. As I stood peering into the darkness, trying to get my eyes used to the murk, I heard a car coming down the street. It was travelling slowly, and as it approached the house it slowed right down, finally stopping outside.

Four quick strides took me to the window. I could see the outline of the taxi, but it was now too dark to see anything more. I caught a glimpse of a figure getting out of the taxi and the cab door slammed. Then the figure came hurrying up the cement walk. A moment later a key turned in the lock and the front door opened.

I slid across the room to the door and stood behind it. I heard the front door close and footsteps sounded in the lobby. A light showed under the door and the doorknob rattled. Then the door opened and I smelt lilac.

I wasn't surprised. I guessed it was Audrey Sheridan as she came up the cement walk. Keeping close to the wall, I shoved my gun into my hip pocket and waited for her to come in.

The beam of the flashlight crept around the peeling walls. A large spider with gigantic legs scurried away from the light, lost its hold on the wall and fell with a little plop to the floor.

I heard Audrey catch her breath in a shudder of horror. I grinned to myself.

She was going to get a bigger scare than that.

Then she was in the room. I could see her clearly outlined against the beam of the flashlight. She was trousered and her hair was caught up in a silk handkerchief.

I didn't give her a chance to get set, but launched myself at her knees.

She gave a little scream as we went down together. For a minute we were a silent tangle of kicking legs and flailing arms. I was scared stiff she'd start some of her jiu-jitsu stuff, so every time she tried to free her arms I smothered her, by lying across her face and pinning her arms to the floor.

"Sister," I said, "you'll save yourself a lot of damage if you'll relax."

Instead, she bit my chest and I yelped, pulling away from her.

She got one hand free and it swished past my face with force; as it came back again, I grabbed her wrist and twisted her arm behind her. Then pulling her up, I turned her over and slammed her face down on the floor. I jammed my knee between her shoulders and nailed her.

"Behave yourself," I panted, "Or I'll really get tough with you."

I heard her catch her breath and she relaxed. "You're hurting me," she said in a small voice.

I didn't ease up. "It'll be a change," I said, sitting across her knees, but still holding her arm screwed up behind her right shoulder blade. "The last time we had a romp, you tossed me against a brick wall."

"And I'll do it again," she said, her voice suddenly furious. "Let me go, you big beast!"

"Start whenever you're ready," I said casually, and put on a little pressure.

She gave a cry. "Don't!" she implored. "You're hurting!"

"It's about time you met someone your own weight," I told her. "You've been having it all your own way. Now, you talk, or I'll tear your arm off!"

"You and who else?" she asked, and giggled.

I also had to grin. "Are you going to behave?" I asked. "Will you sit up and be a good girl if I let you?"

"I'll sit up when I like and I'll behave as I like," she said defiantly, "and it'll take more than a big jerk like you to stop me!"

I put my hand on her head and pushed her nose on the floorboards.

"Don't talk so big," I said, "or I'll dust the whole of this joint with

you.”

God knows what happened then. She suddenly heaved and next second I was lying on my back with my neck caught between her ankles and she was putting on a squeeze that pretty near throttled me.

I'd done a little all-in wrestling in my time and that was something I understood. I had her shoe off and was among her toes before she knew what I was at. She broke the lock and wriggled away from me and for a moment I lost her in the darkness.

I sat up panting, my ears pricked, waiting for her to jump me.

Then suddenly she laughed. “Pax,” she said. “Please, pax.”

“Sure,” I said. “These little bouts with you are shortening my life. It isn't natural for a girl to be so rough. Come and sit down beside me. And if you don't keep your hands to yourself, I'll call a cop.”

I heard her move towards me and then the flashlight went on. I turned and found her behind me. I also found I was sitting on a floor inches thick with dust and I hurriedly got to my feet.

We stared at each other in the beam of the flashlight. We were both covered in dust and Audrey's face was smeared with long streaks of dirt.

“I guess we do look a couple of bums,” I said. “What do you think you're doing here?”

“I might ask you that,” she returned, “but I'm not inquisitive. Let's say hello and good-bye without any further talk.”

“No,” I said. “This nonsense has been going on too long. You're not leaving here until you promise to give me that picture of Dixon you pinched off me. It's entirely due to you I'm getting nowhere in this case. If I had that picture I'd have found the girls by now.”

“Oh no, you wouldn't,” she said, keeping just out of my reach. “You think you could have forced Starkey into the open with it, don't you? Well, I've tried, and it didn't work.”

“You tried?” I exclaimed. “You mean to say you were crazy enough to tell Starkey you've got it?”

She nodded. “I'm afraid so,” she said ruefully. “That's why I'm lying

low for a while. I didn't think he'd dare to start anything with me."

"I bet you've found out different," I said grimly. "It beats me you're still alive."

"I know he's kidnapping these girls," she said in a quick burst of confidence. "And I thought I'd make him produce them if I threatened him with the picture."

"Well, you're wrong," I said. "Starkey hasn't anything to do with the kidnapping. I'm sure of that. All you've done is to put yourself in a hell of a spot."

"I tell you he must be at the bottom of it," she said almost angrily. "It's the kind of thing he'd do. I'm sure you're wrong."

"Okay, skip that for a minute," I said impatiently. "Tell me what you're doing here. I'm looking for Marian French." I snapped my fingers impatiently. "But of course you wouldn't know her."

"Yes, I do," Audrey returned quickly. "She's a new member of the Gazette's staff."

I scowled at her. "Yeah; now you tell me what you're doing here."

"I saw her picture in the Street-Camera window this afternoon. So I thought I'd come out here just to prove to myself that Starkey is connected with the kidnapping."

"But why here?" I asked, puzzled. "She did come here, because I found the address in her room, but how did you know?"

She looked at me uneasily. "This is the house where they found one of the girls' shoes," she told me. "I've been watching it off and on for days, and when I saw them put Marian French's picture in the window I had a hunch to come out here. So I got the key from the agent and—and here I am."

I felt suddenly spooked. "We've wasted enough time already," I growled. "Come on, we're going to take a look at this joint. Give me your flashlight."

Together we went into the gloomy lobby. Ahead of us were stairs. Wallpaper hung in strips and great patches of damp stains showed on the walls.

I pulled my gun and began to walk softly up the stairs. They creaked under my weight. Audrey followed me and we reached the first landing. Three doors faced us. In the second room we found Marian French. She was sprawled on the dusty floor. Her hands still clawed at the cord wrapped and knotted about her throat. Her eyes stared, glassily. Her face was distorted with agony and congested with blood. Her simple blue and white check frock was covered in dust and torn from one white shoulder. She was dead. There was no possible doubt about that.

There was nothing I could do for her. Marian French was dead.

I heard Audrey catch her breath and I put my hand on her arm, but couldn't say anything. I was bewildered, stunned.

We stood looking down at the pathetic but dreadful-looking body for several minutes and then Audrey put her hands to her face and screamed, making a soft, far-away sound of shocked fear. I gripped her arm tightly.

"Steady," I said softly. "Get a grip on yourself. There's work to be done."

She turned away from the body. "I'm all right," she said through gritted teeth. "It—it just—this is dreadful, isn't it?"

I grunted and walked over to where Marian lay. Not looking at her twisted, distorted face, I touched her shoulder. Her flesh was cold and wax-like to my touch and I stood away and cursed softly.

"Whoever did this'll burn," I said, half to myself. "I've fooled around long enough on this job, but now I'm going to start something." I jerked around and grabbed Audrey by her arm. "You know what this means, don't you?" I said viciously. "The technique's the same. Those four other girls went the same way. You can bet your life on that. Are you going to help me find the swine who's doing this or are you still sticking to your precious little Agency?"

She met my angry, challenging look. "I deserved that," she said, quietly. "But I did think Starkey was at the back of it and I did think I could handle it. I'll help you if you want me to."

"Swell," I said, pushing her to the door. "Come on, we have to get the cops."

"Will that do any good?" she asked.

“Macey must see for himself. He can’t back out of this now. We’ll split the town wide open. Come on, let’s get to a telephone.”

Together we left the house, slammed the front door and ran across to a house opposite. I kept my thumb on the bell push until a fat little man in his shirtsleeves jerked open the front door and glared at me.

“Where’s the fire?” he demanded, thumbing a scrubby moustache and staring at Audrey’s dirty face with disapproval.

“There’s been a murder across at 37,” I told him. “I want to use your phone.”

His eyes popped. “Murder?” he repeated. “Who? At 37? Why, it’s empty.”

I elbowed my way into the house. “I want to get the police,” I said. “Where do I find the phone?”

He showed me, and as I was dialling a woman came out of the sitting room and stared at Audrey and then at me.

The fat little man said: “They say there’s been a murder at 37.” He was getting quite a bang out of it.

The woman—fiftyish, grey hair and stiff—eyed Audrey steadily and said, “Nonsense. Send them away,” and went back into the sitting room.

“You’ll have to go,” the little man said miserably. “She thinks you’re drunk. I know. I can tell by the way she looked at you.”

“Nuts,” I said, then as a voice growled ‘Police Headquarters’ in my ear, I asked for Beyfield.

He came on the line after a moment’s delay. “Grab the wagon and come over here fast,” I told him. “I’m reporting a murder at 37 Victoria Drive.”

“Who’s speaking?” he demanded in his rumbling voice.

“Deanna Durbin,” I said, and hung up.

The little man had the front door open and was waiting for us to go, but I took no notice of him. I dialled the number Reg Phipps had given me and when I heard him come on the line I broke the news as gently as I could. I could tell at once the kid was upset, but he was too much

of a newspaperman to waste time with words.

“We’ll get that son of a bitch,” he said. “If you don’t, I will.”

I said we’d get him all right. “Come down here, Reg,” I said, “and bring Latimer if you can find him. He’s checking on Starkey, and you pick him up with any luck at Lefty’s. I want him to take Miss Sheridan, to a hotel and sit with her until we’re through with this.”

He said “Okay” and hung up.

Audrey looked at me kind of old-fashioned, but she didn’t say anything until we were on the street again.

“What’s this hotel stuff?” she said. “You’re not keeping me out of this.”

“I am,” I said firmly. “Macey and Starkey are working together. If Macey spots you, he’ll tip Starkey and then something you won’t like will happen. Don’t forget Starkey wants you badly. Until I’ve fixed him, you won’t be safe.”

“I’ll chance it,” she said. “Now things have started, I must be on the job. I can’t afford—”

But I stopped her. “You and I are working together,” I reminded her. “You must keep out of sight, so please don’t make things difficult.” I gave her the key to the Gazette offices. “Go to the Gazette and wait for Latimer to pick you up. I’ll tell him to get you into a hotel for the night, and as soon as I’m through with the police I’ll join you. There’s a lot we have to talk about. Without you I’m going to have a load of trouble sorting things out.”

As I was talking a yellow cab cruised past and I yelled at it. Still protesting, Audrey got into the cab.

“I’ll be along in a couple of hours,” I promised. “Don’t let anyone in unless they knock three times, two short and a long tap. That’ll be Latimer. You can trust him. Sorry about this, kid, but we can’t afford to take chances now.”

She was beginning to say something when we heard the distant wail of a siren.

“Save it,” I said. “I’ll be seeing you,” and I slammed the cab door and told the driver to step on it.

The cab and the police car passed each other at the end of the street. As the police car pulled up with a squeal of brakes outside No. 37 I crossed the street and joined the three men who had piled out of the car.

I recognized Beyfield, but the other two I hadn't seen before. The driver, who was in uniform, climbed out of the car and eyed me suspiciously.

Beyfield looked at me. "I might have known it was you," he said in disgust. "If you're being funny, you'll be sorrier than hell."

"I'm not being funny," I said coldly. "You'll find a girl in there—she's been strangled."

"Yeah?" he said, looking at the house doubtfully, "How do you know?"

"I've seen her," I said, pushing open the gate. "Suppose you look at her first and then we'll talk."

"You two guys stay here," he said to the driver and one of the plain-clothes dicks. "Harris, you watch this bird and see he keeps with us."

Harris, a short fat man with a red shiny face, anchored himself alongside me.

"I've heard about you," he said, speaking out of the corner of his mouth. "Don't do anything your ma wouldn't like or I'll slap you down."

I was feeling too sick to trade wisecracks with him and I led the way up the cement walk. As Audrey and I had left the house we had slammed the front door, so I went along to the window, pushed it up and stepped inside.

"I'll be interested to hear how you got on to this," Beyfield said as he followed me over the windowsill.

I grunted, but didn't say anything.

Harris crawled into the room behind us and turned on a powerful flashlight.

"Ain't this the house where we found that Kunz dame's shoe?" he wheezed to Beyfield.

Beyfield said it was. "If a body's here," he said, "maybe this lug planted it."

We went up the stairs, reached the landing, and I threw open the door of the room where I had found Marian.

"Take a look at that," I said grimly.

The beam of the flashlight bounced on the opposite wall and then crawled down towards the floor.

"I'm looking," Beyfield said, his voice suddenly hard.

But for the dust, the hanging strips of wallpaper, the pile of soot in the fireplace, the room was empty.

* * *

"Sit down," Macey said, pointing to a chair opposite him. He was behind a big desk in his office on the third floor of police headquarters. I sat down.

Beyfield leaned against the door, took out a package of gum, peeled the paper from it and slid the strip into his mouth. He then hooked his thumbs in his belt and eyed me with blank, stony eyes.

Macey lit a cigar. He took his time about it and didn't say anything until he was satisfied that it was burning properly, then he put his elbows on the desk and glared at me.

"I don't like private dicks," he began, the jowls of his fat face red, "but when a private dick starts being funny, I know what to do with him. Don't I, Beyfield?"

Beyfield grunted.

I took out a cigarette and set fire to it. "I can imagine how scared some dicks would be," I said mildly, "but you don't scare me, Macey. I've got too much on you to worry much about your threats."

Macey showed his yellow teeth in a mirthless smile. "You think you've got something on me," he said, pointing at me with the wet end of his cigar, "but you haven't. We've got you, and unless you talk fast we'll

keep you.” He sat back and regarded me for a long moment, then added: “No one knows you’re here.”

I thought maybe he had something. If these guys decided to knock me off— and if they wanted to there was nothing that would stop them— no one would know what had happened to me. I decided I’d have to play my hand carefully.

“So you found a body in 37, did you,” Macey said, “but it wasn’t there when my boys called? What’s the idea?”

“No idea,” I said. “The body was there, but while I was calling you someone took it away.”

Macey and Beyfield exchanged glances. “All right, someone took it away,” Macey said. “How did you find the body in the first place?”

I told him about the date with Marian French, how, after she hadn’t shown up, I went to her room and found the address of the house.

“She was on the floor with a cord around her neck,” I said. “I’d say she had been dead about four hours. The woman who rents her room said Marian received a phone call at five o’clock and went out right away. She went to meet her murderer.”

“You don’t think we believe this yarn, do you?” Macey asked, tapping ash into his wastebasket.

“I don’t give a damn if you believe it or not,” I returned. “I don’t expect you’ll turn the killer up—I’m going to do that—but I wanted to show you what’s happened to the other four girls who are missing.”

There was a long heavy silence, then Macey said: “What’s the connection between these four girls and French?”

“Suppose we put the cards on the table face up,” I said, shifting a little closer to the desk. “All you’re worrying about is the election. You want Starkey in office so you can feather your own nest.”

Beyfield pushed himself away from the wall, took a quick step towards me and swung at my head. By falling on my hands and knees as the swing started I made him miss. While he was off balance I skidded away from him, stood up and grabbed a chair. I held it so I could crown him if he came in. We looked murder at each other.

Macey exploded with a “Cut it out!” and stood up to thump his desk.

“Sit down and shut up!” he bawled at Beyfield, who was breathing heavily, his face white with rage.

I put the chair down. “If you want a fight,” I said to Beyfield, “you can have it, but it’ll mean a long vacation in hospital for you.”

Macey bawled: “Didn’t you hear me? I said cut it out!”

Beyfield went back to the door and stood chewing and glaring at me. I shrugged, and went back to my chair. “Let’s be reasonable,” I urged. “I said cards on the table, but if you’re scared, then we’ll forget it.”

Macey settled down in his chair again. He rescued his cigar that had fallen on the floor, scowled at it and then at me. “Go on,” he said. “Shoot your mouth off if you want to.”

“You’re not trying to find the missing girls because you’re scared it’ll lead to Starkey. You think Starkey has knocked them off, and if you dig you’ll have to pinch him. As you want him as boss of Cranville you’re too scared to do anything about the case.”

His small eyes shifted away from me, but he didn’t say anything.

“Starkey didn’t kill Marian French nor did he have anything to do with the missing girls,” I went on. “It points to him, but someone’s framing him for it.”

There was an expression of cautious interest on Macey’s face now. “Go on,” he said. “What makes you think that?”

“Maybe you haven’t any more brains than a leg of mutton,” I said, “but you know about the Street-Camera business. You know that every girl who’s disappeared has had her photograph in the window of that Studio and you know Starkey owns the joint. You think the photos were a bait to get the girls to come to the shop, but it wasn’t. There’s someone in this town who is’ out to frame Starkey. Whoever he is works like this. For some reason I haven’t got around to yet, he decided to kidnap and murder a number of girls in this town. Maybe he reckoned that it would be one way to get rid of Starkey, maybe there’s some other angle to it. I don’t know, but I’m going to find out. Anyway, this guy starts indiscriminate kidnapping. First he goes along to the Street-Camera Studio and finds out who’s photograph is on show in the window. The photograph is changed every four days, and he may have to go there a number of times before he recognizes a girl he knows. When that happens, he contacts the girl, kidnaps her, murders her and hides her body. He does that three times, then he

sends pictures of the girls to Dixon, tipping Dixon off that Starkey is using the shop as a bait to kidnap the girls. He hopes Dixon will come out with the story in the Gazette and upset Starkey's applecart. That's what I mean when I say someone is framing Starkey."

Macey brooded. He was interested all right. He had even let his cigar go out.

"How did this guy get the photographs to give Dixon?" he asked, rather to say something than to pick holes in what I'd told him.

"That's easy. Each girl he kidnapped had the Street-Camera ticket with her. That ticket entitled the holder to go to the Studio and buy the photographs. All he had to do was to hand over the ticket and collect the photographs. The joint must do a big trade, and whoever handed the photos over would not be likely to remember who had bought them."

Macey brooded some more, and then as he was going to say something the telephone rang. He scooped up the receiver and growled into it.

I watched him as he listened and saw his eyes light up. He glanced at me and looked away. Then he said, "Okay, that's fine," and hung up. "Maybe you've got something," he said, but I could see he wasn't concentrating. He was thinking of something else. "Suppose that did happen, who's the fellow behind it?"

I shrugged. "That's what I'm going to find out," I returned, "but as long as I know it isn't Starkey and as long as you know it isn't, then we can pry the lid off without worrying what'll come out of the tin."

He pulled a slip of paper towards him and scribbled on "Yeah," he said, "but suppose it's Wolf? You're acting for him and it wouldn't suit you to turn up Wolf, would it?"

"It isn't Wolf," I said, "and if it is, I wouldn't care."

"Give this to Joe," he said, offering the paper to Beyfield. "Tell him to get a move on."

Something at the back of my mind told me that what was happening right under my nose wasn't going to do me any good. But unless I snatched the paper from Macey I couldn't know what it was all about. I watched Beyfield take the paper and leave the room.

“One of my men’s found a guy we’ve been looking for,” Macey explained, without looking at me. “Excuse me interrupting you, but I want to get after him.”

“Sure,” I said. I knew he was lying, but I couldn’t imagine what his game was.

“So you wouldn’t care if Wolf was at the bottom of this?”

I shook my head. “I liked Marian French,” I said. “She was a stranger to the town and I was looking after her. Whoever killed her is going to burn. I don’t give a damn who it is.”

“Suppose you’re right and it is murder,” Macey said, folding his arms and resting them on his desk. “Where are the bodies?”

“Where have you looked?” I said, lighting another cigarette.

That held him for a moment. I knew damn well he hadn’t looked anywhere, and he, knew I knew it.

“Where do you suggest I look?” he said at last.

I shook my head. “I don’t know,” I returned. “Anywhere is a likely bet. Suppose you get a crowd of men organized and take the whole town to pieces? Get a map and mark it off in squares. Have ten men to each square and let ‘em hunt. A body isn’t easy to conceal. It’s the hard way, but I can’t suggest a better one.”

He grunted. “How do you suppose this French girl’s body was taken out of the house?”

“The back way. Easy enough if the guy who did it was strong. All he had to do was to carry the body downstairs into the back garden and heave it over the fence into the lane that runs along at the back of the gardens. If he had a car there, it would be easy. It was dark and no one would see him if he didn’t make a noise.”

“I’ll have the lane checked for wheel-marks,” Macey returned. “Okay, Spewack, I’ll get working on this. I’ll let you know if we find anything.”

“So you’re sure Starkey’s in the clear?”

“Never mind that,” he said shortly. “I’ll look for the bodies on your say-so, but I’m not expecting to find them.”

“Depends how hard you look,” I said, and stood up. “Maybe it would be an idea to let Starkey know I’m not after him anymore. Somehow I don’t think that guy likes me.”

“I’ll let him know,” Macey promised, and smiled again. It was a cold, foxy smile, and I didn’t like it.

I went downstairs and found Reg Phipps waiting for me.

“How did you know I was here?” I asked as we went down the yellow-walled passage to the street.

“When I reached the house and found you weren’t around, I guessed you’d been taken to headquarters,” he said. “What happened?”

I gave him a brief outline of the set-up. “Did you locate Latimer?”

“Yeah, he’s waiting in the car at the next parking lot. We didn’t know where to get in touch with Audrey Sheridan so we thought we’d better hang around for you.”

I quickened my pace. “I want that kid out of the way,” I said. “If Starkey knows where she is, there’ll be trouble.”

“You’ve cleared him of the kidnapping rap, but he’s still in it on the Dixon murder, is that it?”

“Yeah, and Macey knows it. We didn’t touch that angle of it, and if Starkey gets that picture you took of Dixon, then he’s clear of everything.”

We found Latimer in the car and we scrambled in.

“Gazette,” I said to Latimer. “And tread on it.”

As the car shot away from the kerb, Reg said: “So it’s murder and not kidnapping?”

“It’s murder all right,” I said, thinking of Marian and feeling bad about the whole business. “We’ll drop you off at the printer’s. You’ll have to cut out that stuff I gave you on Macey and get the story of the murder on the front page instead. We’ll lay off Macey for a while and see if he plays. If he doesn’t, then we’ll use the stuff.”

Reg groaned. “You make a hell of a newspaper man,” he complained. “You don’t seem to know your own mind.”

I grinned savagely in the darkness. "I do now," I said. "It only wanted this to happen. I'm going all out to get that killer, and I'll get him if it's the last thing I do."

There was silence for a while, then Reg said: "You know, I can't believe she's dead. She was swell."

"She was," I said, "and that's what gets me. This is a personal matter now."

Latimer pulled up outside the printer's shop and Reg got out of the car.

"Give all the facts," I told him, "and when you're through, grab some sleep."

"I'll see you in the morning."

I changed seats and got in the front with Latimer.

"I want a quiet hotel," I told him. "Where do I go?"

He said the Palace wasn't bad and it was not far from the Gazette offices.

We passed the hotel on our way and it looked all right to me. When we reached the Gazette offices I told him to get off home.

"Sure you don't want me?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I'll pick up Audrey and then we'll go to the hotel. We can't do much tonight. Be at the office early tomorrow."

As I was walking across the sidewalk to the entrance of the building he called me back.

"All this excitement made me forget," he said. "I've checked up on Starkey. He has a cast-iron alibi for two o'clock that night. You can't nail him for Dixon's killing."

"I didn't think I could, but I can nail one of his mob, and that'll finish him in Cranville," I returned. "Anyway, thanks for finding out."

"And another thing," he went on. "I don't know if it's any use to you, but Edna Wilson's his daughter."

I stood still. "His what?"

“Yeah. I happened to run into a guy I know and he told me. Starkey married about eighteen years ago. His wife got tired of his ways and left him. She died last year and her kid—Starkey’s daughter—came back to Cranville hoping he’d look after her. He planted her on Wolf, and she’s been feeding Starkey information ever since. The guy who told me used to live in the same town as Starkey’s wife and recognized Edna.”

“I knew she was a phoney,” I returned. “I wonder what Starkey would say if he knew of her relations with Wolf? She must be a nice type of kid to sleep with a guy and betray him at the same time.”

Latimer shrugged. “Women are all the same,” he returned cynically. “They’ll cut your throat while they’re loving you. Anyway, that’s the dope for what it’s worth.”

I said I was glad to have it and went on into the building.

There was no light showing through the pebbled glass door of the Gazette offices. I wondered uneasily if Audrey had gone to sleep. I tried the door and found it wasn’t locked.

One look, around the room, after I had turned on the light, confirmed my worst fears. It looked like a cyclone had hit it. Chairs were overturned, the desk was shoved against the wall, and rugs were crumpled in corners.

Audrey had put up a pretty good fight. The silent and dishevelled office told its own story. Starkey had got her.

chapter six

I paid off the taxi a hundred yards or so from Wolf's house and walked the short distance, keeping in the shadows. It was now a little after twelve o'clock and I was hoping everyone in Wolf's place had gone to bed.

There were lights burning in two-of the upper-floor windows of the house, but the ground floor was in darkness. I walked across the lawn, round the back to the garage. It took me a few minutes to force the lock and another five minutes to get my car out. Fortunately there was a sloping ramp from the garage and I rolled the car down to the drive without having to start up the engine. I manoeuvred it in a position for a quick getaway and then ran round to the front door again. One look at the lock convinced me that it would take too long to force, so I tried a window. I managed to slip a catch, pushed up the window and found myself in Edna Wilson's office. Moving quietly, I stepped into the lobby and listened. No sound came to me, so I started up the stairs. I reached the landing. As I was hesitating what to do next a door at the far end of the passage opened. I ducked back behind the bend of the staircase.

Wolf wandered down the passage. He was wearing a blue silk dressing gown over his tuxedo. A cigar was clamped between his teeth and he moved heavily as if he were tired or had something on his mind. For a moment I thought he was going downstairs, and I began to wonder what excuse I was going to give to explain why I was lurking in his house. But halfway down the passage he paused and rapped on a door. A moment later Edna Wilson stepped into the passage. She was wearing a green silk wrap. She said something to him in a low voice and Wolf scowled at her.

His heavy face went red. "All right," he growled, "if that's how you feel."

"That's just how I feel," she said sharply, and she closed the door in his face.

Wolf stood muttering for a few moments and then he went back to his own room.

I waited a few minutes then I stepped into the passage across to Edna

Wilson's door. I turned the handle. Rather to my surprise the door opened and I walked into a large, lavishly furnished bedroom decorated in green and silver.

A quick look around showed she wasn't in the room. A door on the left stood open, and as I walked softly over to it she came out. I caught a glimpse of a naked thigh that flashed between the opening of her silk wrap, then she saw me, her hands went to her face and her mouth curved into an O.

With my left hand I swept her hands from her face and hit her on the side of her jaw with my right. As she folded up I caught her under her arms and lowered her to the floor.

I paused for a second to look at her. Without her glasses her face had a sort of off-key neurotic charm that only needed some clever make-up to be striking. I was slightly startled to see how glasses had spoiled her looks.

I looked swiftly around the room, grabbed a pair of silk stockings, and rolling her over I bound her wrists together. A silk scarf hanging over a chair back served to fasten her ankles together. I rolled her over again, made a knot in my handkerchief and stuffed it in her mouth. Then I picked her up—she was light and I could feel her bones sticking into me as I carried her—and walked quickly to the door.

I didn't hesitate, but went straight into the passage, down the stairs to the front door. I had to lay her on the floor while I unbolted and opened the door, then picking her up and leaving the door open I ran around to where I had left my car. I bundled her into the front seat, slid under the wheel beside her and started the engine.

It took me twelve minutes' furious driving to reach the printer's shop. I pulled up with a squeal of brakes and paused long enough to make certain she was still unconscious before running across the sidewalk. I hammered on the door.

As luck would have it, Reg Phipps opened the door himself. I grabbed hold of his arm. "Come on," I said. "Starkey's got Audrey Sheridan." Without giving him a chance to say anything I rushed him over to the car. "Get in and drive," I said, and climbed in the back.

He gaped at Edna Wilson, but he didn't start talking. He drove away fast.

"Where to?" he said.

“Now listen, Reg,” I said, leaning forward, “this kid is Starkey’s daughter. She’s working for Wolf, and among other things she’s spying on him. Maybe Starkey likes her enough to trade her for Audrey. Anyway, that’s the way I’m playing it. Have you any place where you can hide her up until I can talk to Starkey?”

“Me?” Reg gasped. “Hell, brother, that’d be kidnapping! There’s a long stretch hanging to kidnapping. They might even fry me for it.”

“Don’t talk like a dope,” I snapped. “The only way to talk to these thugs is in the language they understand. You don’t want Audrey left in their hands, do you?”

“Okay, okay,” he said. “I always was a sucker. Yeah, I can hide her up. How long for?”

“Maybe only for a couple of hours,” I said. “Maybe a day or so.”

“I know a guy who runs a little hotel on North Street,” Reg said. “He’ll rent me a room and not ask questions.”

“Okay, do that. What’s the name of the hotel?”

“Fernbank. It’s in the book.”

“Drop me off at Starkey’s headquarters and then go on to the hotel. Get this kid under cover before she comes to the surface and for God’s sake keep her under cover. I’ll ring you when I want her. Don’t bring her unless I say something about your line being bad. Maybe Starkey will get the drop on me, and I don’t want you to make any mistake.”

“You ain’t going to tackle him alone, are you?”

“I haven’t time to do anything else. Suppose you ring Latimer when you get to the hotel and tell him what’s cooking. Maybe he’ll feel like sticking his heck out. If he does I could use him.”

“Let me come with you,” Reg said earnestly. “We’ll tie this dame up and—”

“No,” I said. “You stick with her. She’s our trump card.”

Reg slowed down. “Starkey hangs out a block from here. It’s a poolroom downstairs, but he’s got rooms on the second floor. There’s a fire escape at the back. That’s your way up.” He pulled in to the kerb and I got out.

“Thanks a lot, Reg,” I said, patting his arm. “Look after this babe.”

I left him, walked down the street until I reached the next block, then turned down a dark alley. I kept on and came to a five-foot board fence. I climbed over the fence and went across a vacant, weed-grown lot towards the rear end of the building that housed Starkey.

Its three storeys were dark and forbidding. I went close to the building, making no noise, my gun in my right fist. Looking up, I could see the vague outline of a fire escape against the sky.

I felt my way along the wall of the building until I was under the free-swinging end of the fire escape. It was almost four feet beyond my reach. I stepped away and jumped for it. My second attempt was lucky and I hooked my fingers in the ironwork. The fire escape came down, creaking as it did so, but not too loudly.

I climbed to the first landing and eased the free-swinging part of the escape back into position so that it came up quietly. Then I continued up the escape until I reached the flat roof. There was a big skylight in the centre of the roof and from it came a bright light.

Stepping softly, I moved forward and peered down. Jeff Gordan was sitting behind a table, his chair tilted against the wall and his hat at the back of his head. He was reading a newspaper. A cigarette hung limply from his great coarse lips. Audrey Sheridan lay on a bed on the other side of the room. Her arms were above her head and her wrists were fastened to the bedposts. Her ankles were tied with cord, which was looped around the foot of the bed. She seemed to be asleep.

I wondered how many more of Starkey's thugs were in the building and what chance I had of getting Audrey out alive. I sank on to my knees and pressed the crosspiece of the skylight gently with my thumb. It seemed to have little resistance. As I was deciding what to do, the door opened and Starkey came in.

Jeff threw his paper aside and stood up. He grinned at Starkey and together they went over to where Audrey was lying. Jeff shook her and she looked up blankly, then, when she saw Starkey, she tried to sit up and began to struggle against the cords that bound her.

Starkey sat on the bed beside her and lit a cigarette. He began talking to her. I couldn't hear what he was saying, but from the look on Jeff's face I could make a guess.

Audrey shook her head.

Starkey went on talking, but I could see Audrey wasn't going to do what he wanted. He finally gave up and sat staring at her with hot, angry eyes.

Then he stood up and shrugged. He said something to Jeff, who nodded his great head. Starkey went out and closed the door, leaving Jeff and Audrey looking at each other.

Jeff stood over her, flexing his thick fingers. Audrey stared back at him, her face white, but her eyes steady.

I drew a deep breath and as Jeff reached for her I put my foot lightly on the centre of the crosspiece of the skylight and then suddenly shifted the whole of my weight onto it.

I crashed into the room amid flying pieces of glass and woodwork. I landed on my feet, staggered, recovered my balance and threatened Jeff with my gun.

He stood gaping at me half in terror, half in vicious, baffled rage.

"Get your hands up or I'll spread your insides on the floor," I said.

His hands went up fast.

"Up against the wall and face it," I said, hearing feet pounding up the stairs.

As he did so, I backed to the door and turned the key. It was a good, strong door and I thought it'd hold. Then I ran over to Audrey, slashed at the cords, and jerked her up.

"Get over there by the door," I said, shoving her as she staggered to her feet. "They'll start shooting in a minute."

Just then fists pounded on the door and a voice yelled: "What's going on in there?"

I fired once at the door. There was a startled yell and then a scurry of feet.

"That'll hold 'em for a minute," I said. "You all right, kid?"

She smiled wanly. "I wouldn't have been if you hadn't've come," she said. "I—I'm glad you came."

"Take it easy," I said, and went over to Jeff. "Turn around, you fat

slob. I want to talk to you.”

He turned and snarled at me.

“You’re a fall-guy,” I said, speaking very rapidly. “I’m tipping you off because I don’t like Macey and I don’t like your boss. They’re framing you for Dixon’s murder. I was with Macey this afternoon. He’s after you. There’s a warrant out for you, and Starkey is playing with him.”

His apish face went sullen. “You’re nuts,” he said. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You killed Dixon to get those pictures. You killed him on Starkey’s say-so. You thought Starkey would keep you covered—so he would have, only the Gazette’s got a picture of Dixon’s body showing he was strangled. Macey knows the only way he can save his hide is to get the murderer. Starkey’s agreed to sell you out. Don’t believe it if you don’t want to, but I’m telling you the cops are out now looking for you.”

As I finished speaking a bullet crashed through the door and brought down a thin trickle of plaster. We were all away from the door and none of us stood a chance of being shot. I banged another slug back and I heard a man curse and move away.

Jeff stood glaring at me, doubt in his little eyes, his mouth twisted with rage and fear. “You’re lying,” he snarled.

I sneered at him. “What good are you to Starkey, you big moronic dolt? What the hell good are you to anyone? If Starkey turns you over to the cops, he’ll cash in for the election: Do you think he’s going to gum up his chances because of you?”

His great fists clenched and unclenched. “She’s got the picture,” he said, pointing at Audrey. “You can’t bluff me, you punk.”

I grinned at him. “We took two pictures,” I told him. “I’ve got one and she’s got the other. I don’t want the cops to catch you. It’d be too easy. I want Macey and Starkey to be in a spot when the Gazette breaks the story. That’s why I’m letting you duck out.” I nodded to the skylight. “Do you think you can get out that way?”

Before he could reply three bullets crashed through the door, but neither of us paid any attention.

“What’s the idea?” he said, his feeble little brain struggling to understand.

“Hell!” I exclaimed. “What more do you want me to say? Beat it before the cops get hold of you. Get the hell outta town. If you’re smart and careful you should beat the dragnet they’ve put out for you.”

I could see that my bluff was shaking him. “Dragnet?” he repeated stupidly.

“Listen, you big stupid dope,” I said, throwing the words at him. “Starkey has sold you out. The cops are after you and I’m giving you a break to get away. Now do you understand?”

He looked at the door and his face went a deep purple. “The yellow-gutted heel,” he said under his breath. “So that’s the way he’s playing it.”

“Come on, you punk,” I said. “Get going. I want to talk to Starkey.”

“So do I,” he said under his breath, and springing up he caught the edge of the skylight and hauled himself up. As he did so a faint wail of a police siren sounded. It couldn’t have been timed better.

I called after him: “Get going. Here they come.”

I heard him curse, then I heard the sound of his feet running across the roof; a moment later he scrambled down the fire escape.

Audrey was staring at me her big eyes bewildered and curious. I went over to her and took her hand in mine. “Take it easy,” I said, smiling at her. “We’ve still got a job to do.”

“But what are we going to do?” she said. “They’ll never let us out of here.”

“You’ll be surprised,” I said and leaving her, I edged to the door. Keeping against the wall, I reached for the key, turned it and threw the door open. “Tell Starkey to come up here.” I yelled. “I want to talk to him.”

The narrow passage crashed with gunfire and more plaster trickled from the opposite wall.

“Hey!” I shouted. “Cut it out. I want to talk to Starkey.” There was silence for a moment. I could hear men muttering.

The sound of the police siren came nearer. Then someone said:

“Throw your rod outside and come out with your hands up.”

Audrey said: “No.”

I smiled at her, tossed my gun through the open door, and heard it clatter to the floor. I walked out with my hands in the air.

A gun was rammed into my back. Four men were standing at the end of the corridor. Starkey was with them. The guy with the gun was a small, mean-faced gunsel, dressed in a shabby black suit. He snarled at me as I looked over my shoulder at him.

Starkey came up, his thin white face puzzled.

“Frisk him,” he said, his voice shrill and excited.

The gunsel ran hands over me and shook his head. “He’s okay,” he said, and stepped away from me. His gun covered me from a distance.

“I want to talk to you,” I said to Starkey. “Just you and me and the girl.”

Maybe he didn’t like the way I said it. Maybe he was just curious, but he walked into the room and I followed him. At the door he said: “Stick around and come in fast if this jerk starts anything.” Then he took the key out of the door and gave it to the gunsel.

We stood in the middle of the room, the door closed and we eyed each other.

Audrey waited near the bed. She was very tense, but curious. “Listen,” I said, “we’re going to do a deal. I’ve got your kid Edna.”

If a horse had kicked him in the face I couldn’t have hoped for a better effect.

We stared at each other for a long moment. His face had turned yellow and his eyes were wide and dull. Then he walked over to the bed and sat down.

“You shouldn’t have told me that,” he said, speaking at his feet. “That puts you in the worst goddam jam you’ve ever been in in your life.”

I found a cigarette and lit it. “Wake up,” I said gently. “You’re the guy who’s in a jam. You turn this girl loose or Edna’s for the high jump.”

He looked up. His eyes burned. “Where’ve you hidden her?”

"Somewhere safe," I said, sitting on the table and blowing smoke at him.

"You're going to talk," he said viciously, "and you're going to talk fast. I've got ways of making a rat like you loosen up."

"What do you think I am?" I said. "If I don't phone the guys who are looking after me in ten minutes they'll take Edna apart. And let me tell you, it won't be hard labour doing just that little thing."

He stared at me and then he shifted his eyes. I could see I'd made myself clear on that point.

"Now listen," I said, speaking fast, "you can't sidestep this set-up. I want someone for Dixon's killing. It's going to be Jeff. Play it my way and it won't hurt you. Start something I don't like and I'll throw you as well as Jeff to the wolves."

"Dixon died of heart failure," he said without any conviction.

"You're still out of the picture," I said, sliding off the table and going over to him. "I'm a peaceful guy until someone tramples on me. I've had enough of Cranville and I'm going to blow it sky-high. If you don't like it, you'll go up with the rest of them. I don't give a damn. Dixon was knocked off by your stooge. He was acting on your orders. I'm not ready to take you yet. There're other things you've got to do before I put a rope around your neck. So I'm making Jeff the fall guy. Give him to Macey and your stock'll go up in Cranville. If you don't, then I'll do it and fix it so they'll all know you told Jeff to do it. Don't think Macey's the only guy in town with any power. The Federal Agents will jump in if I call Washington, and that's just what I'm going to do if you don't play. If you plan to rub me out, take another think. My mob's got Edna, and they don't go for skinny dames. They'll pull her apart and host the parts to you if you try to get rough with me. That's the way it goes and you're going to like it."

He looked like he was going to jump me, but I didn't move. I just stared at him and after a moment he quieted down. "You're crazy," he said. "You can't pull a fast, one like this on me."

I looked at my watch. "Maybe I'd better call my mob," I said thoughtfully. "It's a little over ten minutes and I don't want them to start something you'd be sorry about."

He didn't stop me when I picked up the telephone. There were little sweat beads on his top lip and he was looking sick.

I dialled. Reg came on the line.

"I'm with Starkey now," I said. "He's going to play. Don't touch that dame until I ring you again. I'll be through in another fifteen minutes. If you don't hear from me cut her goddam ears off and send 'em to this punk," and I hung up.

We looked at each other and I could see he was licked.

"Come on," I said. "You and me and the girlfriend are going over to see Macey. You're going to tell Macey how Jeff killed Dixon and I'm going to give him the photograph." I turned to Audrey. "Come on, sweetheart, you and we'll soon be home."

I went to the door with her and opened it. "Come on," I said to Starkey.

He stood up, jerked his hat over his eyes, hesitated and then walked to the door.

"You go first, pal," I said. "just in case your boyfriends speak out of turn."

We walked down the passage, past the four men, who stared at Starkey curiously, and down the stairs. Starkey didn't say anything until he reached the lobby of the poolroom. Then he paused, turned and said: "Maybe we could do a deal."

I eyed him. "We are doing one now," I reminded him.

"Keep the twist and I'll give you two grand. You hand Edna over and forget about Dixon."

I shook my head.

"Five grand," he said tersely.

Again I shook my head. "We'll keep to the original idea," I said. "I want to square things for Dixon . . . he wasn't a bad old guy."

Starkey hesitated and then shrugged. "You'll be sorry for this," he said half under his breath, and we went on to the street door.

"We'll wait here," I said, putting my hand on Audrey's arm, "while you organize a cab."

He didn't see anything wrong in that and opened the door. As he

stepped into the street I shoved Audrey hard to the right, away from the door. Gunfire crashed from the darkness outside and yellow flashes lit the night.

There was a door nearby. I opened it, pushed Audrey into an empty office and closed the door.

More gunfire came from the street. There was also a lot of noise of shouting and pounding feet in the building.

“What’s happening?” Audrey said, white-faced and scared.

“I think we’ve lost our little friend,” I said, crossing the room to another door. I opened it, looked cautiously into the now deserted poolroom. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

Taking her hand, I ran with her across the large, smoke-laden room, twisting between the brilliantly lighted billiard tables to a window that looked on to the vacant lot at the back of the building. I opened the window and stepped on to the fire escape. Audrey joined me and together we pelted down the iron staircase.

More shots were coming from the front of the building and police whistles and sirens were sounding.

We ran across the weed-grown lot, hoisted ourselves over the five-foot fence and kept on until we neared the street. Moving cautiously, we edged from the mouth of the alley. There was a big crowd in front of the poolroom. Police cars were parked on the opposite side of the street and I could see a number of cops trying to force their way through the crowd.

A taxi came round the corner near where the crowd was and drove towards us. I stepped off the sidewalk and waved.

“Palace Hotel,” I said, opening the door. “What’s the excitement, bud?”

The driver glanced back at the crowd and his lip curled. “A couple of guys got shot,” he said indifferently. “I don’t know what’s come over this burg.”

I handed Audrey into the cab.

“The burg’s all right,” I said. “It’s the people in it you want to worry about.”

“Me?” the driver said, engaging his gears and shooting away from the kerb. “They don’t worry me. I mind my own business.”

I looked at Audrey and grinned, “I think the guy’s got something there,” I said. “If you’d minded your own business, maybe we wouldn’t be in such a mess.”

“That’s right,” she said, trying to disguise the shake in her voice, “blame me.”

* * *

The bedroom was large and pleasantly furnished. Between the twin beds was a small table on which stood a telephone. Two large armchairs, a dressing table, two wall cupboards and a pile carpet completed the furnishing.

Audrey lay on one of the beds, a cigarette between her lips and her fingers laced behind her head. I sat in one of the armchairs, a bottle of Scotch on the floor within reach of my hand and a glass half-full of Scotch and Whiterock balanced on the arm of my chair.

“Don’t you realize you are compromising me?” Audrey said lazily.

I grunted. “Do you reckon that’d be worse than death?”

She considered this. “Oh no,” she said, giving me an amused, slightly curious glance; “but are you so sure that it would be death if I had a room to myself?”

I drank a little Scotch, sighed, and put the glass on the arm of the chair. “It’d be taking a chance. Until I’m sure Starkey’s dead I’m keeping you under my wing.”

“I still don’t understand what happened,” she said. “Why did you tell that dreadful man Starkey was framing him. Was he?”

I shook my head. “This case is getting too complicated. There’re too many guys gumming up the works. So I thought a few out of the way would simplify things.” I smiled at her, thinking she looked very beautiful. “So I told Jeff that Starkey was making him the fall-guy. I know that moronic type. You hurt me and I’ll hurt you. It’s the only

language they know. So what does he do? He hops down the fire escape, goes around to the front of the building and waits for Starkey to show. That's why I kept clear when Starkey went to look for a cab. Jeff was waiting out there to give it to him. I didn't want to run into any stray lead. What I want to find out now is whether Starkey is dead or whether he's just winged. I hope lie's dead."

Audrey sat up and rested on her elbow. "You mean you sent him to his death? You knew Jeff was waiting for him?"

I lifted my shoulders. "I didn't know he was, but I was hoping he was."

"How could you?"

"You see, sweetheart," I said patiently, "this isn't a job for a girl. This isn't a sentimental, gloves-on kind of a set-up. It's devil take the hindmost and me first and last. Starkey wouldn't have let you and me get away with the stunt we were pulling. He'd've caught up with us when we weren't thinking and he'd've shot us very dead. No, Starkey had to go, and I only hope Jeff made a good job of it." I finished the whisky and made myself another drink. "Latimer should be 'phoning soon and then we'll know for certain."

She sank back on the bed, worried. "I don't like it," she said. "It was a horrible idea."

"You'd have found it a lot more horrible if Jeff had started some of his persuasive methods. They're a tough bunch, kid, and we've got to treat 'em the way they'd treat us."

She shook her head, but didn't say anything more.

"As soon as I hear from Latimer," I said, a little coldly, "that Starkey's out of the way, I'll leave you. Then you can go to bed and catch up with some sleep."

"You're thinking I'm ungrateful," she said suddenly. "I'm not. I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't burst in like that. It was awfully brave of you and I am grateful, only..."

"Forget it," I said. "This isn't a woman's game. What did you do with Dixon's photograph?"

She looked at me and then looked quickly away. "I tried to get it out of the camera, but it jammed. I—I broke the plate."

I stared at her. "You broke the plate?" I repeated faintly.

"Yes—that's why I was so scared. I—I couldn't give it to Starkey no matter what he did to me and I knew he wouldn't believe me if I told him I'd broken it."

I eased my tie away from my throat and tapped on the floor with my foot. "I think you and I had better start praying that Starkey is dead: If he isn't, we're in a hell of a spot. You know, babe, there are times when I feel like dusting your tail with a hairbrush. If you ever pull another fast one on me, you'll get it. I'll take an oath on that."

"You needn't," she said ruefully. "I'll never interfere with your business again."

"Swell," I said. "I'm not saying you pulled a dumb trick, but you certainly haven't been all that smart."

She turned on her side so she could look at me. "And you, Mr. Spewack, haven't done a great deal in spite of all your big talk. You might remember that when next you feel a superman."

I nodded in agreement. "But you're going to see some action before long," I said grimly. "As soon as I hear from Latimer, I'm going to start. You'll be surprised just how much I'll turn up in a few hours."

"Don't boast," she said. "And I don't think I'd mind something to eat now. Do you think we'll have much longer to wait?"

I shrugged. "I don't know, but I'll order you something. In fact, how you mention it, I could do with something myself. How about some chicken sandwiches and pumpkin pie?"

"Don't talk about it—order it," she said, sitting up eagerly. "I'm absolutely starving."

I reached for the telephone and gave the restaurant the order. As I put the telephone down a knock sounded on the door.

"Who is it?" I said cautiously.

"Me," Reg shouted through the door. "Lemme in."

I went over to the door and opened it. He looked wild and there was an alarmed, excited gleam in his eye.

"What's cooking?" I asked, eyeing him curiously.

He gave a low, sarcastic laugh. "Cooking?" he repeated. "Brother, you don't know nothing yet. That was a hell of a smart trick you hung on to me."

"What trick?" I asked, frowning. "Here, have a drink. You look like you could use one."

He grabbed my glass and swallowed the whisky in a gulp. "Didn't I tell you it was a dumb act to kidnap that Edna dame?" he demanded, as soon as he got his breath back. "Well, you'll believe me now. All hell's apopping."

"You set her loose like I said, didn't you?" I said, staring at him. "What's wrong now?"

He ran his fingers through his mop of untidy hair. "Wrong? That's rich, coming from you. Listen, that dame's so mad she even scares herself. She's running around like someone has put a hornet in her pants. I've never seen anything like it. Why, a tiger with an abscess in its ear is something I'd rather walk around with than that dame."

I looked over at Audrey blankly and shrugged. "I don't know what you're talking about," I said, and meant it. "What makes her mad?"

He turned appealingly to Audrey. "Hear that guy?" he said. "Listen, maybe you don't know what he did. I'll tell you. He busts into the house of Cranville's biggest political boss. He smacks the boss's girlfriend in the slats, takes her half-naked out of the house and farms her on me. What do I do? I'll tell you. I'm sucker number one. I fall for the stuff this rat gives me and I take the dame to a hotel, tuck her up in bed and sit on her face to stop her yelling the place down. Then this guy says 'Okay, let her go.' I try to explain, but the dame just makes a noise like a swarm of bees. I reckon she'll tear me to pieces if I untie her, so I tell the hotelkeeper to undo her after I've gone. Then this lug asks what's wrong."

Audrey giggled. "What on earth made you do it?" she asked me.

"I had to do it. Edna is Starkey's daughter. That was the only way I could get Starkey to listen to reason. What the hell? Edna Wilson doesn't scare me."

"Famous last words," Reg said bitterly. "I haven't finished yet. She's raised hell with Wolf and he's raised hell with the cops. Brother, they're after you for kidnapping. And let me tell you, they're after me too."

"After me?" I exclaimed. "What do you mean?"

"Wolf's charging you with kidnapping," Reg said patiently. "Macey's only too glad to haul you in. They're looking for you now."

Just then the phone rang. I scooped it up. Latimer came on the line "What happened?" I said sharply.

"Starkey's dead. Jeff shot him," he told me. "The cops shot Jeff as he was trying to get away."

I drew a deep breath. "That's fine," I said. "That's the best news I've had for years."

"Glad to hear it," Latimer returned, "but you ain't got much to be pleased about. What have you been up to? Macey's sworn out a warrant for your arrest."

"He has?" I suddenly got mad. "Well, we'll see about that. If these punks think they can push me around . . ." I hung up and turned back to the other two, who were watching me with interest. "Stick around, you two," I said. "I'm going to see Wolf."

"Wait a minute," Reg said, quickly, "you can't go out now. The cops are crawling all over looking for you."

"I'm seeing Wolf," I said angrily, "and no flatfoot in Cranville will stop me."

I went out of the room, jerking the door shut behind me.

A police car was pulling away from Wolf's house when I got there. I gave it a few minutes to get well away and then once more I walked across the lawn and stabbed the bell push.

Although it was just after one o'clock in the morning, the house was a blaze of light and the door opened almost immediately.

I shouldered the manservant aside and walked into the lobby. "Where's Wolf?" I said.

The manservant stared at me with sleepy, bewildered eyes. From his expression I could see I was the last person he expected to call. "I wouldn't advise you to see Mr. Wolf tonight," he said, keeping his voice low. "He is very—er—irritable and——"

"Skip it," I said shortly. "Where is he?"

A voice sounded from the head of the stairs—Wolf's voice. "Who is it? Jackson, who are you talking to?"

I went to the foot of the stairs so he could see me. "Good evening," I said, and began walking up the stairs towards him.

"You get out of my house," he thundered. "Jackson, call the police. Do you hear? Call the police."

I swung around, drawing my gun. I pointed it at the manservant, who went white and almost fell down.

"Come on," I said, threatening him with the gun. "Upstairs, you."

As soon as he passed me I covered Wolf, who stood gaping in surprised fear and rage.

"We'll call on little Edna," I said, coldly. "Go on, both of you."

"You'll pay for this," Wolf snarled, but he went into Edna's room, followed by the manservant and myself.

Edna was in bed. She sat up with a stifled scream when she saw me.

"Take it easy, toots," I said, thinking the bruise on her chin put some character in her face. "Just relax and I won't hurt you again."

I jerked open the bathroom door and shoved the manservant into the bathroom. "Stay there until I call you out," I said, and closed the door.

"If you think you can get away with this!" Wolf began, his face a dusty purple.

I pointed my gun at a chair. "Sit down," I said. "We three are going to have a little talk."

Edna suddenly threw off the bedclothes and jumped out of bed. She was wearing a pair of salmon-pink pyjamas which made her look like an overgrown kid who had raided a lingerie shop.

"I'm calling the police," she said, in a voice shrill with fury. "This cheap dick can't bluff me. If you had any guts you'd throw him out."

Wolf's face sagged a little, but he didn't move. The gun pointing at his stomach seemed real enough to him.

I let her reach the telephone and then I took two quick steps, caught

her wrist, ducked a savage blow she aimed at my face and tossed her across the bed. As she scrambled up I handed her a smack on her tail. It sounded like a paper bag bursting, and with a thin wail of pain, fury and fright, she wriggled hurriedly under the bedclothes again.

“Anything more from you,” I said quietly, “and I’ll skin you alive.”

She glared at me with wide, furious eyes, but she didn’t make any move.

I sat down so I could cover them both and lit a cigarette. “Now we’ll talk,” I said, looking over at Wolf. “It’s time you and I had a showdown.”

“You’re sacked,” he said, between his teeth. “You’re not working for me anymore. I’ll sue your boss and I’ll sue you. I’ll get you a stretch in jail!”

I laughed at him. “Okay,” I said, “I’m sacked. That suits me. But I’m telling you something before I go. Starkey’s dead. He was killed half an hour ago. How do you like that?”

His eyes showed interest, but he didn’t say anything. Edna gave a low cry and her face seemed to fall to pieces. She turned over in bed and began to cry, muffling her sobs in the pillow.

Wolf looked at her uneasily.

“She’s his daughter,” I told him. “He planted her on you so he could know all your moves.”

There was a long silence broken only by Edna’s crying. Wolf looked down at his feet, his face haggard. “You’re lying,” he said at last.

“Ask her,” I suggested. “You wouldn’t have stood a chance of becoming mayor with her watching every move. Between the two them they could have cooked up a tale that’d have discredited you and maybe run you out of the town. You’ve been playing with dynamite with this little bird.”

He pointed to the door. “Get out,” he said, his voice shaking with rage.

“I’m going,” I said, “but you’re phoning Macey and you’re telling him to lay off me. You’re telling him you’re withdrawing the kidnapping charge or I’ll spread the story of your love nest all over Cranville.”

"I want you out of this town," he said. "I've had enough of you. I'll withdraw the charge if you'll get out and stay out."

I grinned at him. "You'll withdraw the charge without any conditions. I'm the guy who holds the whip hand. I've got the story set for the front page of the Gazette and you can't stop it. I'll stay here until the paper is on the streets. When Cranville hears that Edna is the daughter of a small-time gambler as well as your mistress, you'll be in a sweet jam."

He still hesitated; so I reached for the phone and put a call through to police headquarters. When Beyfield came on the line I gave the phone to Wolf. "Tell him it was all a mistake. Say the kid was hysterical and wanted to frame me. Go on."

He had a long mumbling conversation with Beyfield and finally he went all over it again with Macey. He withdrew the charge and from the way he had to argue I guessed Macey was wild. Anyway, he made it stick in the end. He slammed down the receiver and glared at me.

I stood up. "Okay," I said. "I'll leave you to sort out the mess." I glanced at Edna, who was still out of sight under the bedclothes. "Maybe you'd better send her away. From now on I'm working on my own. I came to Cranville to find three missing girls. Well, I'm finding them. Anyone who gets in my way is going to get hurt. You keep out of this and you may grab yourself the mayorship or you may not. I don't give a damn who becomes mayor. With Starkey out of the way, the fight's between you and Esslinger. That's something you have to thank me for. I fixed Starkey and I'll fix a lot of other guys in this town if they don't play. That goes for you too."

I got up and walked out of the room before he could say anything. I went downstairs, opened the front door, crossed the lawn and climbed into my car.

The clock on the dashboard showed that it was one-thirty. I was tired but I wasn't discouraged. I could now concentrate on finding Marian French's killer.

Maybe it wouldn't be easy. But I was going to find him. Cranville wasn't a big town. Someone in Cranville was responsible for the killing, and if I got the right kind of lead it shouldn't be difficult to run him to ground.

I returned to the Palace Hotel, went upstairs and found Audrey and Reg fast asleep. They were lying on the twin beds, still dressed, and I

had to shake them before they knew I was in the room.

Audrey sat up and groaned faintly. "I'm so tired," she said. "What happened? Did you see Wolf?"

"I saw him," I said grimly. "You turn in now. We'll meet tomorrow. There're things I want to talk to you about. Come on, Reg, we'll get a room here and get ourselves some sleep. We're out of a job. Wolf s sacked me, and that goes for you too. How would you like to become a detective?"

Reg looked at me sleepily as he rolled off the bed. "Sure," he said; "that's been my life's ambition. I never did think I'd be editor of the Gazette for long."

I grinned at him. "Come on," I said. "You weren't cut out to be an editor, but you'll make a swell detective. Let's go get a room."

He ambled over to the door. "Do you want me to see the desk clerk while you tuck her in?" he asked, eyeing Audrey with his youthful leer.

"Get a double room," I said, pushing him into the passage. "We'll need to watch our expenses."

"Don't take too long saying good night to that blonde," he returned. "I want some sleep even if you don't."

When he had gone, I stood over Audrey as she lay on the bed and we smiled at each other. "All right now?" I said. "Anything else you want?"

"I'm fine—just tired, that's all. Is it all right about the kidnapping?"

I sat on the bed by her side and took her hand. "I fixed Wolf. In his position he can't afford to get tough with me."

She looked down at our hands. "I suppose he can't," she said, "but you will be careful?"

"Don't worry about me. I've knocked around too long to let a fat old guy like Wolf upset me." I stroked her hand absently, thinking how nice she looked. "We're partners now," I went on; "only the senior partner. What I say goes."

"I suppose I'll have to let you have your own way," she said lazily.

“All right, I’ll admit I’ve made a mess of things. I’m in no position to get tough with you either.”

“Now you are being smart,” I said. “In fact you’re not in the position to refuse me anything.”

“Not anything?” she said, in mock alarm.

“Not anything,” I repeated, slipping my arm under her head and half raising her. Her head rested in the crook of my arm and our faces were close. “Does that worry you?”

She looked at me seriously. “No, I don’t think it does.”

I kissed her. “Sure?”

She pulled my head down. “I like it,” she said softly. “Let’s do it again.”

* * *

Eleven o’clock the next morning we went over to Audrey’s office to plan our campaign.

“Now let’s see what we have to do,” I said as soon as we had settled down. “It’s a certain bet Wolf will try to stop the investigation. I don’t know what Forsberg will do about that. Maybe he’ll recall me. If he does, then I’ll quit working for him. I’ve chiselled two grand out of Wolf and that’ll keep us off the bread line. Our job is to find the guy who killed Marian, and we’re going to find him. I’ll split the two grand three ways so we’ll all have a little dough, but we’ve got to work fast and get this case cracked before our dough gives out. Is that all right with you two?”

“Isn’t it foolish to throw up your job with the International Investigations?” Audrey said, looking worried. “I mean, jobs don’t grow only on trees, and you might want...”

“That’ll have to look after itself,” I broke in. “Maybe Forsberg will let me go ahead. He’s had a retainer from Wolf and he might give me a free hand. Anyway, I’ll wait until I hear from him. I don’t give a damn one way or the other. I wouldn’t mind setting up in business on my

own. We three might make a good thing out of it. But never mind that for the moment. I want to run over this case and see what we've got."

"Not much," Reg said gloomily. "We don't seem to be getting anywhere."

"And I'll tell you why," I said. "Up to now we have all been concentrating on the election angle. But suppose these kidnappings have nothing to do with the election?"

"But they must have," Audrey protested.

I shook my head. "There's no must about it. Suppose we ignore the election entirely. Never mind about Wolf or Esslinger or Macey. We'll forget them. Let's begin from the beginning. Four girls disappear. There're no clues except a shoe belonging to one of them which is found in an empty house. Then a fifth girl disappears in exactly the same way as the other four, only this time we find her body before the murderer can hide it. If we hadn't have gone to the house at the time we did we should never have known that Marian had been killed. She would have disappeared in the same way as the other girls disappeared. It's a safe bet that the other four girls were also strangled and maybe they were all killed in the same house. That gives us something, doesn't it?"

"I suppose so," Audrey said, doubtfully. "It gives us the method, but I don't see how it helps."

I went over to her desk and sat down. "We'll put this down on paper," I said, picking up a pencil. "Take the girls first. What do we know about them?"

"They're just ordinary girls," Reg said. "Nothing much there. Why should anyone want to kill them?"

"They were all blondes," I said, writing that down. "Maybe that has nothing to do with it, but it's a point. They were all young and they all belong to the same set except Marian." I stared at the paper and then added: "Well, that doesn't get us very far, does it?"

"I would like to know how the murderer persuaded them to go with him to that empty house. I mean, a girl would be half-witted to enter a lonely, spooky-looking house like that unless she trusted the person she went with," Audrey said.

I stared at her for a long moment. "Yeah," I said, "the nickel drops,

You have something there. Someone phoned Marian and arranged to meet her at the house. We know that because she had a phone call and she wrote down the number of the house. Why did she go there without even calling me to tell me where she was going? She knew where I was.”

“She went there because she knew the person who called her and she thought she could trust him,” Audrey said, the colour going out of her face.

“Ted Esslinger,” I said softly. “He was the only guy, except Reg, Wolf and me, that Marian knew in this town.”

“The other girls also knew Esslinger well,” Reg said, his eyes gleaming with excitement. “They all knew him well enough to go with him to an empty house if his story was good enough.”

Audrey got to her feet and began pacing up and down. “But this is crazy,” she said. “He can’t be doing it. Why should he? It—it’s all wrong. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Take it easy,” I said, lighting a cigarette and inhaling smoke deeply. “We don’t know it’s Esslinger. It just happens that it could be him.”

“That guy has always run around with the girls,” Reg said, a little bitterly. “But why he should be knocking ‘em off beats me. What’s the motive?”

“I can’t believe it,” Audrey said. “I’ve known him all my life. Ted isn’t a killer. I’m sure he isn’t.”

I sat brooding, feeling a rising excitement. “Wait a minute,” I said. “Let’s forget Ted for the moment. Tell me something. Suppose you were a murderer and you wanted to get rid of the body of your victim. How would you do it?”

“Bury it some place in lime,” Reg said promptly.

“Somewhere where it wouldn’t be found. Some absolutely safe spot,” I said. “Burying it in lime isn’t safe.”

“There’s a big furnace in the smelting works,” Audrey said with a little shudder. “Although I can’t imagine how anyone could get body from Victoria Drive to the furnace undetected.”

I shook my head. “They couldn’t. That would be too dangerous. I tell

you where I'd hide a body if I wanted to be sure it wouldn't be found—in a graveyard.”

Reg said: “That’s a fine spot, but getting a body to the local graveyard from Victoria Drive would be as dangerous as taking it to the smelting works.”

“Not if it were handled by the local mortician,” I said quietly.

They both stared at me, then Reg leapt to his feet. “That’s it!” he exclaimed. “It fits! Of course it’s Ted Esslinger! He’s killing these dames and the old man is burying them. All he would have to do is put them in the hearse, take it out at night over to the graveyard. If anyone saw the hearse they’d think nothing of it. He’d have the keys to the graveyard and he could plant the body in someone’s grave.”

Audrey had gone very white. “I can’t believe it,” she said. “You don’t know Max Esslinger. He couldn’t do a thing like that.”

“But it fits,” Reg said. “It explains everything.”

“No, it doesn’t,” I pointed out. “It doesn’t explain why Ted’s killing these girls. What’s the motive?”

“There isn’t one,” Audrey said. “You’re letting your imagination run away with you.”

“All right, let’s go over it again. Suppose Ted Esslinger is the killer. Let’s see if we can find a motive. Why should he kill five girls in so many weeks? The obvious answer to that is he is a homicidal lunatic.”

Audrey shook her head. “I’ve known him all my life. We went to school together. He’s as normal as you are.”

“We can’t be sure of that,” I pointed out. “Maybe he has suddenly lost control of himself. What sort of a kid was he? Did he have a temper; was he moody, that kind of thing?”

“He was perfectly normal,” Audrey insisted. “He liked the girls, of course, but that doesn’t make a man a lunatic, does it?”

“No—all right, let’s forget the lunatic angle. Why else should he kill them?”

“You don’t think he got them into trouble and to save his skin—” Reg began, but stopped.

“What, all five of them?” I said. “No, that’s out. Besides, knowing Marian, he wouldn’t have got anywhere with her on those lines.”

We sat and brooded for several minutes, then I said: “How fond is he of his father?”

“They’re great pals,” Audrey said seriously. “They’d do anything for each other. But he doesn’t get along so well with his mother.”

“Does he want his father to become mayor? I mean really want him to get the job?”

“I think so. I couldn’t say for sure.”

“This is a fantastic idea, but it hangs together,” I said excitedly. “Suppose Ted wanted to give his father a break with the election. If he could get Starkey out of the running, his father would stand a swell chance, wouldn’t he?”

Reg said: “So what? You don’t mean he killed the girls so his father could become mayor? That’s just one hell of an idea.”

“I don’t mean that. Suppose Ted has a kink. Maybe he’s a religious fanatic. Maybe he’s a sex maniac. He could be anything. Suppose he sees a way to fix Starkey and at the same time satisfy his crazy repression.”

“But he hasn’t got a crazy repression,” Audrey said. “I know him too well.”

“Listen: if I had a crazy repression I wouldn’t tell you about it. I’d keep it to myself,” I said shortly.

“Have you?” Reg asked, grinning.

“Never mind that. Stick to Esslinger. Suppose he is a nut. You remember the Street-Camera Studio? He could have been the guy who tipped Dixon. Come to that, he could have been the guy who killed Dixon. No, it must have been Jeff, because Starkey wanted those pictures back.” I ran my fingers through my hair.

“Hell! This is driving me screwy! But, wait a minute, it was Ted Esslinger who started the theory about the Street-Camera. He got me thinking that way. Suppose he decided to frame Starkey for the murders he was committing. All he has to do is to watch the Street-Camera window, and when an enlarged picture of a girl he knows

appears he gets the girl to this empty house, strangles her and takes her to the funeral parlour. He collects the tickets from the girls and gets the photos from the Street-Camera. He tells Dixon that Starkey is using the Street-Camera Studio as a bait to kidnap the girls, putting Wolf and Esslinger out on a limb, as they have guaranteed to find the girls. Dixon doesn't fall for this, so Ted comes to me and slips me the dope. Or doesn't that make sense?"

They stared at me blankly.

"No, it's too fantastic," Audrey said at last.

I thought about it and decided she was right. "Well, it's nearly right," I said doubtfully. "I'll bet you even money that Esslinger's funeral parlour is mixed up in these murders."

"You don't know the other girls were murdered. Just because Marian was killed, it doesn't mean " Reg began.

"Now don't go spoiling my theory," I said. "It must work out the way I see it. It clicks. I'm sure it clicks. We'll start work right now. The only way to get to the bottom of this is to dig and keep digging. I want you to go to the Street-Camera Studio and find out if Ted's ever been there. Checkup that first. Try and find out who collected those photos of the three girls, Luce McArthur, Vera Dengate and Joy Kunz. Find that out and we'll be getting places. Off you go."

Reg said: "Okay, I'll see what I can turn up."

When he had gone, I said: "Look, babe, I want you to check up on Ted Esslinger. Find out where he was on the night of each of the disappearances. See if he has an alibi. Get friendly with the guy and stick close to him. See if he's got any crazy ideas. Unless there's something we've missed, there can only be one explanation: Ted's crazy. Try and find out if he is."

Audrey nodded. "I'll do it," she said, "and what do you intend doing?"

"It's time I went along and met Max Esslinger," I said. "I want to look his funeral parlour over. Maybe I'll get some ideas."

She picked up her gloves and bag. "You'll like Max Esslinger," she said. "I'll swear he had nothing to do with this business, and you'll think so, too, when you meet him."

I pulled her to me. "You haven't got my nasty suspicious mind," I said,

and kissed her.

She pushed me away. “We’ve had enough of that to go on with,” she said severely. “Hands off.”

“Just a minute,” I said, taking her in my arms again. “Didn’t I say I was the senior partner? What I say goes.”

“All the time?” she asked, smiling at me.

“All the time,” I returned.

The room was silent for a while.

chapter seven

I stopped my car outside of a two-storey, grey stone building with a large display window, the upper portion of which was decorated with gold lettering, reading Cranville Mortuary. There was an oak coffin on trestles in the window and nearby was a large black and white check bowl containing stiff, wax-like lilies.

The glass-panelled door opened softly under my hand. The air of the purple-carpeted reception room smelt of embalming fluid, aromatic, sweet and sickening. I closed the door and glanced uneasily around. The imitation ebony coffin with ornate silver handles that stood against the opposite wall and the smell of death in the place gave me a spooky feeling.

At the back of the room was a black velvet curtain hanging from a brass rail.

It obviously hid a door. As I stood waiting, the curtain was drawn aside and a man appeared. He looked like something that had escaped from a freak show. His face was bloodless and his frame was as bony as a skeleton's. Thin straw-coloured hair was oiled flat to his skull and his black, sunken eyes burned like hot coal.

He eyed me suspiciously and asked in a soft, timbreless voice if he could help me.

He looked so much like a ghoul that for a moment I could only stare at him.

"Mr. Esslinger in?" I asked at last, pulling myself together with an effort.

"Who shall I say wants him?" the man returned, motionless and forbidding.

"Tell him an operative of the International Investigations would welcome a word with him," I said, taking out a packet of Lucky Strike, but watching him closely.

He looked away from me, but not before I saw fear in his eyes. "I'll tell him," he said, "but he's busy right now."

"I'm in no hurry." I flipped a match across the room. "Just tell him who wants him and I'll stick around."

He gave me a long, hard stare and then went away. I dragged down a lungful of smoke and waited. After a while I wandered over to the imitation ebony coffin and examined it. It was a nice job and I wondered vaguely if it would fit me. It seemed a little too narrow, although the length would take me all right. After I'd been over it for a few minutes and exhausted its interests I went over to a framed notice hanging on the wall giving prices of coffins and their various styles. I was surprised to find how cheaply you could be put underground.

"You wanted to see me?" a voice asked softly behind me.

I didn't jump more than a foot.

Max Esslinger was an older edition of his son. His face was more lined and his eyes more thoughtful than Ted's but the likeness was remarkable.

"Maybe you've heard of me," I said. "I've been working for Wolf up to this morning."

He smiled and put out his hand. "Why, of course," he said, in a pleasing baritone voice. "You're the detective from New York, aren't you? I'm glad to know you. Aren't you working for Mr. Wolf anymore?"

I shook hands, feeling a little blank. "We had a difference of opinion," I said, with a grin, "and I quit."

Esslinger shook his head. "I'm afraid Wolf's a difficult man to get along with. I've known him for a long time. Come into my office. We can talk there without being disturbed."

I followed him through the door which was hidden by the black velvet curtain, down a passage, past a couple of doors and into a pleasant, well-furnished room.

He waved me to an armchair and sat down behind a large flat-topped desk.

"Now, Mr. Spewack, what can I do for you?" he asked, pulling open a drawer and taking out a box of cigars.

I shook my head. "Not for me," I said, setting fire to my cigarette. "As I was saying, I quit working for Wolf this morning. I'm interested in this case, Mr. Esslinger, and I wonder if you've any objection if I worked with Miss Sheridan. It wouldn't cost you anything. Wolf's taken care of the financial angle and he's not getting his money back. I'd like to clear up this business before I returned to New York."

I was surprised to see his face brighten. "That would be generous of you, Mr. Spewack. I must confess I am very worried that nothing so far has been done. I am more than anxious to get the matter cleared up myself."

There was no doubt of his sincerity, and I remembered what Audrey had said about it not being possible for him to have had anything to do with the missing girls. There was something about Esslinger that more or less convinced me that she was right.

"That's fine," I said. "Frankly, I was expecting some opposition from you. I heard you wanted Miss Sheridan to have a free hand."

He stared at me, puzzled. "Why, no," he said. "Of course, when heard Wolf had engaged an expert and was hoping to make political capital out of this dreadful affair, I had to take similar steps. But I assure you, Mr. Spewack, I won't rest until these girls have been found or their murder has been brought to justice."

I eyed him thoughtfully. "It's murder," I said slowly. "There can be no mistake about that." I went on to tell him about Marian French.

He laid down his cigar when I had finished and I could see he was obviously shaken. "Who can be responsible for such a horrible crime?" he asked. "I can't believe anyone in Cranville could deliberately murder innocent girls without any motive whatsoever. It's unbelievable."

"Maybe there is a motive," I said, flicking ash on his nice pile carpet. "That's something I'm going to work on. Either there's a motive or the killer's a homicidal lunatic—a sex killer."

"You say this poor girl's body has disappeared?" Esslinger asked. "But how could it? Where was it taken?"

I shook my head. "I don't know," I said, "but that's another thing I'm going to find out." I paused, then shot out: "Why did you engage Audrey Sheridan in the first place? I understand no one in Cranville ever thought she'd crack this case?"

Just for a moment I caught a look of caution in his eyes, but it had gone almost before I could register the fact. "I don't think I quite understand what you mean," he said; there was a cold note in his voice.

"I think you do, Mr. Esslinger" I said. "Audrey Sheridan's a nice kid. I like her. I like her a lot, but she hasn't any experience in this game. I don't mind telling you she gummed up a number of leads I was working on because she was so keen to crack this case by herself. But this kind of a case can't be cracked by a woman. It's too tough. Why did you hire her?"

A faint flush had spread over his face. He picked up his cigar, examined it, found it had gone out, and lit it. "I was confident Miss Sheridan was capable of finding the missing girls," he said at last. "You must remember, Mr. Spewack, that there was no question at that time that the girls had been murdered."

I eyed him and he looked away. "Baloney!" I said, curtly. "But if you don't want to come clean, I can't make you—"

"But I assure you—" he began.

I raised my hand. "Forget it," I said. "When I first saw you I thought you were a straight guy. But now I'm not so sure. You had a reason for putting Audrey Sheridan on this case, and it wasn't because you thought she could find the missing girls. There was some other reason. Maybe you didn't want them found, and by hiring Audrey you knew damn well they wouldn't be found!"

He sat up. "How dare you say a thing like that!" he snapped angrily.

"Audrey Sheridan's the owner of the only detective agency in Cranville. It was only natural that I'd go to her."

"Yeah?" I said, shaking my head. "There are plenty of agencies with big reputations not so far away who'd have been glad to handle this case. They wouldn't have cost you much more than Audrey Sheridan and they'd have got a hell of a lot more results. I'm not satisfied, Mr. Esslingen."

He controlled himself with an effort and leaned back in his chair. "I think you're exaggerating the position," he said, with forced calm. "My conscience is clear that I've done the best with the means I had at my disposal. I'm more than willing that you should continue with the case, and if necessary I should be prepared to finance you."

“Okay,” I said, stubbing out my cigarette. “I still think there’s something at the back of all this, but I’m going ahead. What chances do you think you have of becoming mayor?”

He eyed me steadily. I could see he had his nerve back and he was now on his guard. “I don’t imagine I’ll have much trouble with Wolf,” he returned, pursing his lips. “He’s not popular in town, and now you have ceased to work for him I doubt if he’ll succeed in his plan to find the girls.”

“Is Macey likely to put up another candidate now Starkey’s out of the way?”

He shrugged. “He might. I don’t know.”

“Who’s the skinny guy I met outside?”

His face clouded. “You mean Elmer? Elmer Hench? He’s my brother-in-law. He runs the business for me. I have little to do with it now. Politics take up too much of my time.”

I stood up. “Well, I guess that’s about all, Mr. Esslinger,” I said. “From now on I’m going to get some action. You’ll be seeing me again.”

He didn’t move. “I have every confidence in you,” he said, staring down at his snowy blotter. “I’m sure you’ll do your best.”

“That’s one thing you can be sure of,” I said shortly, and turned to the door.

Then I paused.

A woman was standing in the doorway. How long she had been there I had no idea. She was tall, grey-haired, and her moist eyes had the sympathetic expression of wet stones. She wore a black silk dress that hung on her like a sack and there were jet buttons in her ears. When she spoke her voice had a hard baritone quality and sounded as if it didn’t want any nonsense. “Who is it?” she asked Max Esslinger.

“Mr. Spewack—the New York detective,” Esslinger said, his eyes, tired and uneasy, on the woman’s face. To me, he said: “This is my wife.”

There was no gladness or pride in his voice when he said it. The flatness of his tone, the look in his eyes, hinted of some secret despair.

Mrs. Esslinger looked at me and she moistened her lips with the tip of

a pale-pink tongue. There was something rather horrible about that tongue. It reminded me of the soft belly of a slug.

“What do you want?” she said.

“It’s all right,” Esslinger broke in quickly. “He’s going now. He wanted to help Miss Sheridan. Wolf doesn’t want him to work for him anymore.”

Mrs. Esslinger’s bloodless hands folded, the fingers of her right hand holding the back of her left hand. “Audrey doesn’t need any help,” she said. “Tell him to go away.”

“I’m going,” I said, stepping past her to the door. There was something frightening about this big, vicious-looking woman. I could see the likeness between her and her brother. They were both bony, sharp-nosed, and the bloodless, cruel mouths were identical.

“I don’t like spies in my house,” she said, as I reached the door, “so don’t come here again.”

I went down the passage, through the door curtained by the velvet drapes and into the reception room.

Elmer Hench stood by the imitation ebony coffin, his long, thin, bony hands clasped in front of him and his head on one side as if he had been listening for some time.

He followed me across the room with his eyes, but neither of us said anything.

I opened the front door and, taking a deep breath, stepped into the sunshine and the noise of the traffic.

* * *

I left word with the desk clerk for Reg and Audrey to meet me at Joe’s Bar, a couple of blocks away from the hotel.

When I got to Joe’s liar, just after seven o’clock, there were only a few customers in the place and no one in the small restaurant at the back.

I told the barman I was going through to the restaurant and if anyone

asked for me that's where I'd be. He said, "Okay", and I went into the back room, found a table in a corner away from the entrance and sat down.

A waitress in a blue overall came over as soon as I'd settled. She asked if I'd like the special dinner.

"I'm waiting for friends," I explained. "Maybe you could get me a drink."

When she smiled I saw she had nice teeth, and when looking at her more closely I found she had one of those figures that make truck-drivers have accidents.

"What would you like?" she asked, leaning over me. Her perfume made me dizzy.

I said I'd have a large whisky straight and watched her cross the room to the bar. Her figure seemed to run after her in excited little jerks.

Before she came back with the whisky, Reg blew in. He grinned when he saw me and pulled out a chair. "I'm starving," he said, flopping down. "This sleuthing gnaws at my vitals."

"Never mind your vitals," I said. "Have you found anything?"

The waitress came back before he could tell me. She said, "Hello, Pinkie," to Reg, who turned red. She put the whisky beside me.

I looked at Reg inquiringly. "What'll you drink?" I asked.

"Don't encourage him," the waitress said, giving Reg a patronizing smile. "I'll get him a coke."

I watched her figure with interest until she was out of sight and then said: "Friend of yours?"

He snorted. "She lives in our house," he said, scowling. "Just because she's got nice teeth she thinks I'm crazy about her."

"Teeth aren't everything," I said, and then: "How did you get on?"

He ran his fingers through his unruly hair. "Ted's known at the Street-Camera Studio," he said. "He's been there a number of times and he did buy some photographs. The dame there doesn't remember whether the pictures were of the missing girls or not."

“Couldn’t you refresh her memory?”

He shrugged. “She’s dumb,” he said, in disgust. “You know the type of dame. She wouldn’t remember when she had her last meal.”

“How come she remembers Ted going there?”

“He made a play for her,” Reg returned. “That guy goes for the dames in a big way. She thought he bought the pictures as an excuse to call on her.”

“Haven’t you any details?” I asked, rolling a cigarette across the tablecloth to him.

“He started coming to the shop a month or so ago. He got friendly with this dame—she fell for him in a big way—and he used to pick up one or two pictures of girls that were lying on the counter. After he’d kidded her for a while, he’d pay for the pictures and beat it. She was in such a trance she never noticed what the pictures were.”

“He didn’t give her a ticket then?”

Reg shook his head. “No, I guess he was too smart for that. I did find out the pictures taken on the previous day were always displayed on the counter. It looks like he’s the guy, but it’ll be difficult to pin it on him.”

I grunted. “That doesn’t get us very far,” I said. “What else did you find out?”

Reg let smoke drift down his nostrils. “I called on a friend of his. A guy named Roger Kirk. He and Ted go around together. He knows me, but he didn’t open up. I think maybe you might have a talk with him.”

I looked at him thoughtfully. “What’s on your mind?”

“This guy Kirk might know how involved Ted was with the missing girls. If you could scare him enough to talk, you might find something to work on.”

“It’s an idea,” I said, “but we’ve got to watch out step. If Kirk tips Ted that we’re suspicious of him, it might gum up the works. After all, Esslinger’s going to be the big noise in this town if I’m not mistaken, and we’ll have to watch out. But still, I don’t think we can afford to pass up any lead. I’ll see what I can do about Kirk.”

"I'll leave him to you," Reg said, shifting restlessly on his chair. "When do we eat? I'm starving."

"When Audrey comes," I said, finishing my drink. "What do you know about Elmer Hench?"

"That guy?" Reg screwed up his face. "He gives me the heebies. Did you ever see such a guy? They ought to put him in movies."

"But do you know anything about him?"

"Not much, he runs the Funeral Parlour for Esslinger. I've heard it said he's a pretty smart mortician. He specializes in embalming. By the time he's through with a corpse you'd think it was alive. I haven't seen any of his work and I don't want to, but it's supposed to be good."

"Mrs. Esslinger's his sister, isn't she?"

Reg nodded. "Nice pair," he said. "She got him the job when Esslinger went in for politics and he's stuck ever since. I'm sorry for Esslinger having a ghoul like that around."

"Is it right Mrs. Esslinger drinks?" I asked. "Dixon said so, but she doesn't look a drinker to me."

Reg shrugged. "I wouldn't know," he said. "She's queer. Esslinger's scared of her."

"How do you mean?"

"She runs him and the business. I did hear she made Esslinger stand for politics. Of course, she's crazy about Ted, but I guess you know that."

I shook my head. "From what I saw of her, she wouldn't be crazy about anyone. I don't like her. She makes me feel spooked."

The waitress came back with Reg's coke. "Are you eating yet?" she asked.

"Gee!" Reg protested as I shook my head. "Where the hell's Audrey? Didn't I tell you I'm starving?"

"Okay," I said, "two special dinners." When the waitress had gone away, I went on: "Now I wonder if that kid's got into trouble again."

Reg looked past me and grinned. "Not this time," he said. "Here she

comes.”

I turned in my chair.

Audrey, looking nice in an apple-green dress and large white hat, was coming across the room. Her eyes were alight with excitement. As I stood up I knew something had happened. “What is it?” I asked.

She laid a blue ticket on the white tablecloth. “That was given to me just now,” she said, pulling up a chair and sitting down.

I didn’t have to look at the ticket twice. I knew what it was even before I read the caption at the top: You have just been photographed.

I sat down slowly and stared across at Audrey, feeling the blood leaving my face.

“Now don’t fly off the handle,” she said, smiling at me. “You ought to be pleased. Isn’t this just the chance we’ve been waiting for?”

“What do you mean?” I asked sharply, trying to shake off the first effects of the shock. “If you think you’re going to monkey around with this, you’re crazy.”

She sighed and looked at Reg for support. “What’s the matter with the man?” she asked. “Here’s something that’ll lead us straight to the killer and he tells me I’m crazy.”

Even Reg was looking agitated. “Listen, sister,” he said gently. “The guy loves you.”

It was Audrey’s turn to look startled. “Why, I thought it was a secret,” she said, with an embarrassed laugh.

“So did I,” I said, grimly.

“Why, a blind man with an abscess in his ear would know the sucker’s fallen for you,” Reg told her scornfully. “Where did you get this from?” He picked up the card and examined it.

Audrey put her bag on the table and lit a cigarette. “A man took my photograph this afternoon,” she said lightly. “I was with Ted Esslinger and he had his photograph taken too.”

The waitress came back with the special dinners. She eyed Audrey a little enviously. “Same for you?” she asked.

I pushed my plate over to Audrey. "You have it," I said. "I'm not hungry anymore."

Audrey said: "But you must eat. You mustn't worry about me."

"I'm all right," I said shortly, and to the waitress: "I'll have another Scotch."

"What love does for a guy," Reg said shaking his head. "If ever I go off my food, I'll know what it is."

"You shut up," I said, annoyed. "I've got things on my mind."

"You certainly have," Reg returned, bolting his food like he hadn't had a meal all day. "Eat up," he went on to Audrey, "this is swell."

I tapped the blue ticket. "I don't like this," I said. "From now on, Reg, you're not to let Audrey out of your sight."

Reg glanced up, pursed his mouth in a soundless whistle and grinned. "Suits me," he said. "When do you take a bath?" he went on, giving Audrey a leer.

"Oh no," she said firmly, "none of that. So you think I can't take care of myself, Mr. Marc Spewack?"

"That sounds like famous last words," I returned. "I tell you I don't like it, Audrey. From now on you're having a bodyguard."

"And what a guard!" Reg muttered under his breath. "And boy! What a body!"

"If you don't take this seriously," I told him, "I'll twist your goddam neck. You're to watch Audrey, do you understand? If anything happens to her, you're done for."

Reg laid down his fork. "You don't honestly think the frill's in danger?" he asked, astonished.

"Don't call me a frill," Audrey said, indignantly. "Where are your manners?"

"I do," I said gravely. "From now on, we're taking no chances. Look what happened to Marian." I turned to Audrey. "Did Ted say anything when you were photographed?"

"He seemed a bit scared," Audrey returned. "He said I'd have to be

careful.”

I snorted. “I bet he did. Well, we’ll be careful all right. What else did you get out of him?”

Audrey shook her head. “Not much,” she said ruefully. “In fact nothing at all.”

I looked front her to Reg. “It strikes me neither of you are worth the money I’m paying you. Didn’t you find out if he had an alibi for the night of the murder?”

Audrey stopped eating. “Now look, Mr. Spewack,” she said, hotly, “if you’re going to be superior I’ll quit and work on my own.”

“And a long way you’ll get if you do,” I said, grinning. “But seriously, didn’t you even find that out?”

“I did not,” she said. “He wouldn’t talk. I try to lead up to it, but he closed down like a clam. But he did ask me to go out with him tomorrow night.”

I took the whisky from the waitress and thanked her. After the others had ordered ice cream and the waitress had gone away, I said: “You mean he’s made a date?”

Audrey nodded. “I may not be much of a detective, but I’ve still got my sex appeal,” she said.

“Take me over it slowly,” I said. “You and Ted are childhood pals, aren’t you?”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Reg said scornfully. “A guy can go to high school with a dame, pull her hair, pour ink over her and then suddenly he gets singing in his ears and he falls for her, It’s happened to me.”

“Will you pipe down?” I said, shortly. “When I want extracts from your love-life I’ll ask for them.”

“Don’t quarrel, you two,” Audrey said, hastily. “Ted and I haven’t mixed for years. I just happened to work on him and he’s interested.”

“That’s a laugh!” Reg said bitterly. “What a word—interested And in ordinary circumstances the guy wouldn’t look at a girl.”

I finished up my Scotch as the waitress brought the ice cream, so I

ordered another.

"You've got a thirst, haven't you?" Reg asked, staring.

"I'm laying a foundation," I said. "There's a job we have to do tonight and it won't be a pleasant one."

"So you're loading up enough liquor for the three of us, is that it?" Reg asked, pushing his coke away in disgust.

"You've got it," I returned, "but we'll fix Audrey first." I turned to her.

"What are you up to?"

"Can't you see? If Ted's the killer, this is the one way we can trap him. When I was photographed I knew what I had to do I started working on Ted and he fell for it. We've the same set-up now that led to the other killings. I'm Ted's new girlfriend. I've been photographed. My photograph will appear in the Street-Camera Studio window, and it only needs me to disappear. The wheel's turned a full circle. Only this time I don't intend to disappear."

I thought about this. "Maybe you'll be safe until the picture appears in the Street-Camera Studio window. It may not. If it does, then we mustn't leave you for a second."

"It will appear," Audrey said. "I telephoned them and fixed it. They're making a special enlargement and have promised to put it in their window."

Reg looked at her admiringly. "You've got guts," he said. "Now maybe we'll get somewhere."

I didn't like any of this, but it was no use raising objections.

"Okay, kid," I said, "we'll stick close to you. Where are you meeting Ted tomorrow night?"

"He's calling for me. He said something about dinner and a dance, but there was nothing decided."

I looked at Reg. "We three are going over to the Cranville cemetery when it gets dark. I want to look around. Then you take Audrey back to the hotel and stick with her. I'm going to take a look at Esslinger's Funeral Parlour."

"Listen," Audrey said, leaning forward. "Why don't you also have a

look at Ted's bedroom? He told me he'd be late tonight. We could go over there now."

"You can't do that," Reg said hastily. "If we're caught Esslinger'll stick the cops on us."

"Do you know where his room's located?" I asked, thinking it was a good idea. "Can I reach it without trouble?"

Audrey nodded. "It's at the back," she said. "You could do it easily. Come on, I'll drive you over now."

I pushed back my chair. "Okay," I said, "let's go."

Reg groaned. "You're sticking your neck out," he said. "Hench and Mrs. E. will be in the house. You don't think they'll let you get away with this, do you?"

"Don't be chicken-hearted, Pinkie," I grinned, and led the way out.

* * *

Esslinger's house was a modest, two-storey building on the outer limits of the town. It stood on its own small plot of land and was hidden from the other houses by a tall box-hedge.

In the rapidly falling darkness Audrey brought us to the back of the house along a narrow, deserted road. It was after ten o'clock by the time we had reached the house, and although the upper floor was in darkness, lights blazed from a room on the ground floor.

Audrey stopped the car and we all got out.

"That's his room, there," she whispered, pointing to a small window that projected from the sloping roof. "All you have to do is to walk tip the garden path, climb the pipe-stack and you'll be on the roof. It's easy to walk up to the window from there."

"Who do you think he is—Tarzan of the Apes?" Reg muttered.

"Okay," I said. "You wait here. If you see anything moving, sound the horn."

Audrey slipped her hand in mine. "You will be careful, won't you? I mean I don't want you to break your neck."

I looked down at her, wishing Reg was out of the way. "Don't worry about me," I said, "I'll be all right."

"If you two want to be more intimate, don't worry about me," Reg said sarcastically. "I can stand it if you can."

I put my hand over his face and gave him a shove, then with a quick smile at Audrey I swung myself over the fence and dropped onto the soft ground of the flowerbed.

Keeping in the shadows, I moved silently up the garden. The light from the sitting room blazed on to the lawn and I could see, before I reached the house, I would have to pass right through this patch of light. As I drew nearer, I slowed my pace, and finally, just outside the edge of light, I stopped and peered into the silting-room.

Mrs. Esslinger sat facing me. She was sitting in a large armchair and she was knitting. Although her fingers guided the needles with what seemed to me an incredible speed, her eyes stared out of the window. She seemed to be staring right at me and the fixed, cold expression in her eyes gave me a spooky feeling. I instinctively ducked back into the darkness. I waited for a moment, wondering if she had seen me, and then as nothing happened I peered into the room again.

She still stared out of the window, but I was sure now that she couldn't see me out there in the darkness. But I would have to be careful how I crossed the patch of light.

I went down on my hands and knees and, moving slowly, crawled into the patch of light. I felt naked for those few seconds it took me to reach the cover of the shadows.

I stood up as I neared the house and listened. Nothing happened. Except for a car that roared past the front of the house, there was no sound. But I made no move. I leaned against the wooden rails of the verandah and waited.

Nothing happened for a long minute, then I saw a shadow on the lawn, near me. Mrs. Esslinger was standing at the window. The light from the room threw her shadow in a long, distorted shape on the close-clipped grass. My heart began to thump steadily and suddenly my mouth went dry.

I pressed myself further against the verandah, knowing it was dark enough where I stood, but I was scared. There was no time to analyse this feeling of fear.

Somewhere in my subconscious I was astonished at being so scared. Mrs. Esslinger was certainly bad for my nerves.

I waited there, hardly breathing and in a chill of a cold sweat. The shadow moved suddenly and then I saw Mrs. Esslinger's head. She was peering into the garden, silently and intently. I knew she was listening.

She was so close to me that if I had taken three steps towards I could have touched her. If she turned her head and looked in my direction, I felt sure she would see me. It was the worse few seconds I've ever experienced.

She suddenly seemed satisfied that no one was in the garden, for she disappeared from the window and abruptly drew the curtains. The garden was plunged into complete darkness, and for a few seconds I could see nothing. Then gradually my eyes became used to the darkness and the house took shape again.

I hesitated about entering the house, wondering where Hench was, wondering if Mrs. Esslinger had gone upstairs. That was something I had to find out.

Moving cautiously, I approached the window. The curtains were tightly closed across the window, but the window itself was open. I leaned forward, my heart banging against my ribs, and listened. At the back of my mind I wondered if Mrs. Esslinger was standing behind the curtains waiting to spring out on me. Just the thought of that made my knees knock together. Very faintly, I heard the clicking of knitting needles and I quietly stepped away from the window.

If I was going to get into the house, I must do so quickly. There were no other lights showing, and I hoped both Esslinger and Hench were out.

I found the stack-pipe Audrey had told me about. It was at the far end of the house away from the room where Mrs. Esslinger was sitting. I tested it and found it strong enough to take my weight. Before making the climb I took off my shoes and then, gripping the pipe in both hands, I edged my way up the side of the house.

It took me only a few moments to reach the sloping roof, and hooking

my fingers in the gutter I drew myself up on to the tiles. I was sweating with the exertion, and it was only then that I realized the night had become hot and oppressive. Although the moon rode high, a black cloudbank was moving slowly on the horizon and it looked to me as if a storm were blowing up.

I stood on the roof and looked across the garden into the road. I could see the car parked not far away and the dim outlines of Audrey and Reg watching me. I raised my hand and they waved back. Then I turned and walked carefully up the gentle slope of the roof towards Ted's bedroom window.

The window was uncurtained and the room was in darkness. I got my fingers under the window-frame and pushed it up. It opened noiselessly and I peered into the room. The light from the moon was sufficient for me to see the room was empty. It was a hard, bare masculine room with a polished wood floor, a couple of small rugs in an Indian design, two straight chairs, a bureau in dark-grained wood with a man's toilet set and black candles in foot-high brass candlesticks.

The bed was narrow and looked hard and had a dark-green cover. The room felt cold.

I across the windowsill and walked to the door. I opened it a few inches and listened. No sound came to me. Then I shut the door, took a small wooden wedge from my pocket and forced it into the chink between the door and the floor. I wasn't taking chances of anyone coming in and catching me off-guard.

I went immediately to the bureau and began going through the drawers. The last drawer gave me what I wanted. In a corner, under a pile of silk shirts, I found a packet of photographs. I took them to the window and in the light of the moon I saw they were the photographs of the missing girls. I felt blood hammering against my temples as I looked down at the calm, attractive face of Marian French.

I shoved the photographs into my pocket and turned back to the bureau. As I did so I paused, feeling the hair on the back of my neck stiffening.

The moonlight was now shining directly on the white painted door and I distinctly saw the handle slowly turn. Then the door moved, but immediately stopped as the wedge held it.

That was enough for me. Silently I stepped to the window, swung my

leg over the sill and got on to the roof. I waved once to Reg, who waved back, and then I half slid, half slithered to the gutter. My legs went over the edge of the roof and hung in space while I got a grip on the gutter. I hung for a moment, my heart pounding and fear catching at my belly. Then I dropped silently into the garden, staggered, recovered my balance and stood up. A moment later I had wedged my feet into my shoes and, not pausing to tie the laces, I turned to run down the garden path.

Without warning a sudden swishing sound made me duck. I felt something hit against my shoulder. I had one horrified glimpse of a noosed cord falling to the ground and then I spun on my heel and ran.

I blundered across the garden, fell over the fence and landed almost at Reg's feet.

"Come on!" I panted. "Let's get the hell out of here!"

Audrey had started the engine and I scrambled into the seat beside her. Reg tumbled in behind us.

"Scram!" I said to Audrey. "They've spotted us."

Nothing was said for the next few minutes. Audrey drove fast, concentrating on the road, while I sat limply beside her, trying to get over my fright.

"Okay," I said at last. "Pull up here. We're far enough away now."

She slowed down and stopped under a street light. "You seemed in a hurry to leave," she said, looking at me intently. "Why, good gracious, the poor man looks actually scared."

I drew a deep breath. "Scared?" I said. "That's an understatement. I nearly had a heart attack."

Reg leaned forward and breathed heavily down my neck. "Dicks don't get scared," he said dryly. "Not New York dicks."

"Shut up, you two," I snapped. "This is serious. Someone was waiting for me in the garden and damn near strangled me."

"You were dreaming," Reg said with a snigger. "Why don't you admit the shadows scared you and you ran away."

"Don't rib him, Reg," Audrey said softly. "I believe he has had a

fright.”

I took the photographs out of my pocket and dropped them in Audrey’s lap.

“Take a look at this little lot,” I said grimly. “Maybe they’ll hold you two dopes for a moment.”

“Where did you get them?” Audrey asked as soon as she saw what they were.

“They were hidden under a pile of shirts in Ted’s bureau,” I said grimly.

“This is the first real evidence I’ve got. They’re all there, even Marian. He’ll have to be smart to talk himself out of this.”

“You weren’t kidding about being strangled?” Audrey asked, looking at me with wide, anxious eyes.

“You bet I wasn’t,” I said, fumbling for a cigarette and offering her one.

“Someone tried to lasso me. If I hadn’t ducked they’d have had me around the neck. It was quite a circus trick.” I turned to Reg. “Do you know if rope-spinning’s one of Ted’s accomplishments?”

He shook his head. “That’s a new one oh me,” he said, looking blank.

“Well, that’s the way these girls were killed,” I went on. “I’m glad it happened to me. We now know what to watch out for.”

“You didn’t see anyone, I suppose?” Audrey asked.

I shook my head. “Did Ted say where he was going tonight? If he’s the killer, then it was he who was waiting for me with the rope.”

“He told me he was spending the evening at the Ciro Club. Shall we check up?”

“You bet we’ll checkup,” I returned. “Let’s get to a drugstore where we can phone and then we’ll go on to the cemetery. You know, I’ve a feeling this case is coming to an end.”

“You really think Ted’s the killer?” Audrey asked, engaging gears and driving slowly down the dimly lit street.

"It looks like it. The photographs should be enough evidence to fry him if the case is handled right. Then this attempt to knock me off points to him again. If we can find the bodies, we ought to have a cast-iron case against him."

A few minutes' driving brought us to a drugstore. I told Reg to call the Ciro Club and find out if Ted was there.

While we waited in the car, I said to Audrey: "When this business is over, have you thought what you're going to do?"

She looked away. "Not really," she said. "I don't think I'll be a detective anymore. I don't seem to be good at it."

I put my hand over hers. "With me," I said, "you could be very good. Why don't you and me become partners?"

"I might consider it," she said cautiously. "But you're awfully domineering."

"Not if I were your husband," I said airily. "You'd be surprised how nice I could be. Didn't you know I am one of the world's great lovers?"

"I had an idea you thought you were," she said, with a little giggle. "Although you're the only one who does think so."

I put my arm around her and pulled her to me. "Come on, honey," I said. "You know you can't get on without me—say yes."

Reg stuck his head through the window. "For God's sake!" he exploded. "Can't you two keep your minds on business? The moment I leave you, you start canoodling."

"One of these days someone's going to take a dislike to you," I said fiercely, hastily taking my arm away. "I didn't think you'd be so quick."

He opened the car door and scrambled in. "I made a rush job of it," he said with a leer. "Why should you be the only one to have fun and games?"

"Well, come on, you lug," I said. "Is he still there?"

"No, and what's more, he hasn't been there all evening. What do you make of that?"

Audrey and I exchanged glances.

“Okay,” I said. “It looks like we’re on the right track. Let’s go—Cranville cemetery first stop.”

We came upon the burial-ground as a distant clock struck twelve. Overhead, torn, black clouds obscured the moon and distant thunder rumbled ominously.

“We only want Bella Lugosi with us and it’d be a picnic,” Reg said, his teeth beginning to chatter.

“Shut up,” I said, peering out of the car window. “That’s no way to talk so near the dead. Where’s your respect?”

Audrey pressed her foot down on the brake pedal and the car stopped. “What now?” she said, looking a little fearfully at the tall gloomy walls surrounding the burial-ground.

I opened the car door and stepped out. The air was still and oppressive. I could smell rain and, far to the east, I could see faint flashes of lightning.

“Before very long,” I said, glancing up and down the deserted road, “we’re going to have a storm.”

“Never mind about the storm,” Reg said, climbing out of the car and standing beside me. “It’s this joint that worries me!”

“Forget it,” I said sharply, feeling spooked myself. “What’s a graveyard between friends?”

Before he could think up a suitable reply I walked over to the massive iron gates and pushed. They swung open with a harsh squeak that made my nerves tingle.

“Okay,” I called to Audrey. “Can you drive in?”

The car edged its way through the gateway and stopped in the middle of the centre lane of the graveyard.

I closed the iron gates and told Audrey to put out the car lights.

The heavy scent of graveyard flowers hung in the air. Underfoot, cinders crunched and sounded to me like firecrackers. A faint mist rose from the graveyard. In the shadows of tombstones and willow trees it was like smoke.

Audrey and Reg stood close to me. They didn’t like this place any

more than I did.

What the hell have you brought us here for?" Reg whispered, looking furtively to right and left. "What are we going to do?"

"We're going to look at the register," I said, pointing to the attendant's white lodge that stood back from the gates. "I want to see who's been buried lately."

"What a guy for ideas!" Reg sighed. "Couldn't you have done that during the day? Why pick on midnight?"

"Use your head," I said shortly. "If I had done that I'd have told the killer the game was up."

Audrey stared at me. "You really think you're going to find something?" she asked.

"Unless I've got it all wrong," I returned, "I'm going to find the missing girls tonight."

Reg drew a deep breath. "I'm scared," he said, in a small voice. "I suppose no one thought of bringing some liquor?"

"There's a half pint flask in the car," Audrey said. "I'll get it."

We all had a drink, but it didn't help much. Thunder rumbled.

It sounded nearer; and lightning lit up the graveyard with faint yellow flashes.

"Let's get it over," I said, and walked down the lane towards the lodge.

I had to break a window before I could get in. Audrey and Reg climbed in after me. After a few minutes' search I came upon a leather-bound book.

"This is it," I said, putting the book on the table. "Hold the light, Reg, so I can see."

In the bright white beam of the flashlight, with thunder crackling overhead and Audrey and Reg jostling against me, I opened the register at the last page and began to read. The evidence was there for anyone who knew the facts.

There had been only two burials during the past ten weeks, but on a

page headed 'Private Crypts' was the damning evidence:

CRYPT No. 12

Harry MacClay

Mary Warren

Edward Cook

Sheila Ross

Gwen Hurst

"What the hell does it mean?" Reg whispered, staring at the names blankly.

"Know any of these people?" I asked, looking first at him and then at Audrey.

They both shook their heads.

"Don't you see how it was done?" I said. "These names have been faked to fool the graveyard attendant. Come on, we're going to take a look at Crypt Twelve."

Audrey's sudden scream was drowned by a violent crash of thunder. She clutched at me, making my heart jump wildly.

"Someone was looking through the window," she said, fearfully. "I saw a face . . . pressed against the glass."

I pushed her to one side and ran to the window. It was now as dark as the inside of a closet. I put my head out of the window and listened, but apart from the wind moaning in the trees I could hear nothing. Then all sound was blotted out again by another crashing clap of thunder.

I turned back into the room. "Are you sure you saw someone?" I asked.

Audrey shivered. "It looked like a face. I only caught a glimpse of it, but it did really look like someone was watching us."

Reg's face had gone the colour of a fish's belly. "Let's get outa here,"

he said unevenly. "I don't like this one bit."

"Not before we've seen Crypt Twelve," I said obstinately. "The key must be around here some place."

The other two stood a little helplessly, glancing fearfully from time to time at the window while I searched for the key. I found it eventually with a number of others hanging on a board behind the door.

"Here it is," I said, checking the number burnt on a big wooden tag. "Let's go."

"I hate going out into that darkness," Reg said, nervously looking out of the window.

"You can stay right here if you want to," I said, sliding my leg over the sill, "but I'm going to look at that crypt."

"We'll come with you," Audrey said hastily. "I couldn't stand being left here alone."

With the beam of the flashlight to show us the way, I went on ahead, the others behind me. I had no idea where Crypt Twelve was located, but I was going to find it.

We had walked some way before we came to the first crypt. That was numbered 7. There seemed no system or plan in the numbers. The next crypt we came to was 23 and the next one was 15.

A sudden zigzag of brilliant lightning made us all duck, but the thunder was seconds behind the flash. Then it came with a tremendous clap that sent Audrey staggering against me.

"Oh, I don't like this!" she wailed, clinging to me.

"Hitch up your girdle," I said, giving her a quick hug, "we've got to go through with it."

On we went, across new grass, circling tombstones, along cinder paths, down grassy inclines, trampling over flowerbeds and ploughing across freshly dug earth.

It was a nightmare journey; looking for a needle stuck in a wall in a dark room. All the time thunder drummed a muffled march for the dead.

Then suddenly we found it. We found it just when I was going to give

up.

We were all tired, hot and frightened. Out of the blackness suddenly caught a glimpse of something white: There before me was large marble crypt fenced in by iron railings. The beam of my flashlight picked out the number—12.

“For God’s sake,” I said. “Here we are.”

A long, jagged streak of lightning lit up the graveyard for one blinding second. I could see Audrey and Reg near me, their faces white and their eyes wide.

To the right of me was the white crypt and beyond, some fifty paces away, was Elmer Hench.

I saw all this in the one brief brilliant second and then we were in black darkness again. Instinctively, I had my gun in my fist.

“Wait,” I shouted to Reg, and ran forward.

I cursed the feebleness of the flashlight beam. It was like a pinprick in a strip of black velvet held against a light.

There was no sign of Elmer Hench, but I knew he was there. I had seen him, tall, bony and frightening, like a lost spirit risen from a rave to rebuke us for intruding.

Sweat, cold and clammy, plastered my shirt to my back. I was really scared.

This was a fear that dried my mouth, chilled my blood and turned my legs to water.

It was useless to try to find him. He might be anywhere. He might be behind me, in front of me or at my side. He might even have an away.

I turned back and reached Reg and Audrey, who were standing by the crypt, stiff with alarm,

“What are you playing at?” Reg said, his teeth chattering.

“Hench is in the graveyard,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady. “I saw him.”

Reg stared into the darkness. “That ghoul!” he gasped. “Well, let’s get outa here. I’ve had enough.”

I shoved my gun into his hand. "We're going into the crypt," I said, "and you're seeing that Hench doesn't disturb us. That's your job."

"I don't think I'll ever make a detective," he returned, his voice quavering. "I think I'll resign."

I wasn't listening to him. With shaking fingers I shoved the key in the lock on the iron gate and turned it. With Audrey at my heels, I ached the door of the crypt. Using the same key, I unlocked the massive marble door and pushed. It opened slowly and together we walked down two steps into the vault. The cloying odour of dead flowers and the smell of death came to us.

Audrey put a cold hand in mine. "I'm so frightened," she said.

"Shush!" I whispered, listening.

Thunder crashed over our heads, died away and then rumbled in the distance.

I could hear Audrey breathing near me. The fan shaped beam of the flashlight travelled around the square room. I could see shelves and on each shelf was a coffin. I counted five of them.

"Where's Reg?" I asked, not moving, but staring at the coffins in a fever of excitement and nerves,

"At the door," Audrey said, her voice high-pitched and unnatural.

"Take it easy, kid," I said, putting my hand on her arm. "We'll be out of here in a moment." I turned back to the door, where I could see Reg staring tensely into the darkness. "Keep your eyes skinned, Reg," I whispered. "If you see anything you don't like, shoot."

"For the love of Mike, get a jerk into it," he pleaded. "I'm losing stones this way."

I knew how he felt. I was feeling the same way myself. The idea of Elmer Hench waiting out there in the darkness made me jumpy. I wouldn't have minded so much if I could have seen him, but the darkness and the thunder and Elmer Hench were a little too much.

I gave Audrey my flashlight. "Just stay where you are and hold the light so I can see," I said. "I am going to open up one of these coffins."

I heard her catch her breath. "No . . . don't!" she said. "Marc . . .

please . . .that's horrible! You can't do that."

I took from my hip pocket a long thin screwdriver I had brought from the car. "I have to do it, honey," I said. "There's no other way around it."

I left her and went over to the broad shelf opposite me. On it rested two mahogany coffins. Their silver handles gleamed in the bright beam of the flashlight.

As I tried to read what was engraved on the small brass plate screwed on the top of the coffin the light began to bob up and down.

I turned and looked back at Audrey. She had gone very white and I thought she was going to faint. I sprang across to her and put my arm around her.

"Gee, I'm sorry," I said, gently. "I shouldn't have brought you here. Look, go and stand near Reg."

She shook her head. "I'm all right," she said, clinging to me. "It's just the air in here, and—and I'm scared. I'll sit down, I'll be all right in a moment."

I took the flashlight from her and sat her down near the door on the bottom marble step.

"What's going on?" Reg asked, his voice unsteady.

"You watch out for Hench," I said. "Never mind what's going on here."

"I'm watching," he returned. "It's as black as coal out here and even the lightning's stopped. I wish to hell you'd get through with this business. I want to go home."

"Can you stick with it for five minutes?" I said to Audrey. "I shan't be longer than that."

"Of course," she said, but she was looking so white she scared me.

Taking the flashlight, I went back to the coffins again. I was scared myself, but if I wanted to crack this case I had to go through with the business.

I read the plate on the first coffin. It simply said: Harry MacClay. 1900-1945. I began the gruesome task of unscrewing the coffin-lid.

My hands were slippery with sweat and unsteady with fear. The screwdriver kept slipping out of the groove in the screw and once it slipped so badly it scored a long cut across the polished surface of the coffin. Thunder rumbled in the distance. That, the creaking of the screws as they came out and my heavy breathing were the only sounds in the damp, musty-smelling vault.

At last I had got all the screws out and I stood back, almost too scared to go further. The beam of the flashlight lit up one side of the vault and threw my shadow across the face of the wall. I put the screwdriver down on the shelf and wiped my hands with my handkerchief.

Audrey said in a low voice: "What is it?"

I glanced back at her. She stood up and moved a few steps forward, then she stopped.

"It's all right," I said. "I'm nearly through."

Then I put my hands on the coffin-lid and raised it.

As I did so a vivid zigzag of lightning lit up the vault. For one brief second I saw the frightened, grotesque face of Marian French staring up at me from the coffin and then Audrey screamed.

Dropping the coffin-lid, I spun round.

Audrey was crouching back, her hands to her face. I looked beyond her to the door. Reg was clawing desperately at his throat. Even as I stood staring at him, unable to move, he suddenly seemed to be drawn into the darkness, and a moment later the heavy vault door closed with a thud. As the thunder died away, I heard the key creak and then the lock snapped into its stone socket.

chapter eight

It was a full minute before I realized how completely trapped we were. In that time I had darted to the door and flung myself against it. It was solid stone and I simply bounced off it with a badly bruised shoulder. I ran round the square building with the flashlight, but there was no other exit. The floor was of stone with no possibility, without proper tools, of hacking it up.

I stood staring at Audrey, my face glistening in the now yellow beam of the flashlight, while she looked at me in horror.

“Did you see?” she gasped, running to me. “He’s killing Reg! You must do something . . . you must help him!”

I held her to me. “For God’s sake, Audrey,” I said, gripping her arms, “don’t lose your head. We can’t do a thing. Don’t you understand, kid, we’re buried alive!”

She stiffened and held on to me, but she didn’t say anything.

I waited a moment, then said: “What fools we were to come in here without telling anyone! He’s got us all right. What the hell are we going to do?”

Trying to steady her voice, Audrey said: “We’ll get out . . . it’s—it’s Reg . . . there was a rope around his neck . . .” She caught back a sob.

I hadn’t even my gun. Except for the flimsy screwdriver, I had nothing with which to tackle the door. Pushing Audrey gently aside, I examined the lock. I saw it was hopeless. A stick of dynamite wouldn’t shift it.

To make matters worse, the flashlight was failing. I snapped it off and we stood in the heavy darkness, listening, but the thick walls of the tomb cut off all outside sound.

The thick, cloying atmosphere, the darkness and the feel of death in the place stretched my nerves almost to breaking point.

“I’m not so scared now,” Audrey said suddenly out of the darkness. “Let’s sit down, Marc. I’m sure someone will get us out of this.”

I groped for her, touched her hand, and together we sat on the bottom step. I wished I felt as she did, but it was no use showing her how scared I was.

“So it was Hensch, after all,” Audrey said, leaning against me. “We’ve just got to get out and make him pay for this.”

“I don’t think it was Hensch. Why shouldn’t Ted have been there too? Know what I think? Hensch is tied up with this but he isn’t the murderer. He’s the guy who’s been getting rid of the bodies, but I’ve a hunch he’s not the killer.” I put my arm around Audrey’s shoulders. “But this isn’t going to help us get out of here.”

“Don’t think about it,” Audrey said. I could feel a little shiver run through her. “We mustn’t think about it, or we’ll go crazy. I’ve often dreamed of being buried alive . . . haven’t you?”

“Now, shut up!” I said roughly. “That’s no way to talk. I wish this flashlight wasn’t going back on us.” I put it on again. The yellow feeble light was not reassuring. “Wait a second,” I said, and getting up I walked over to the coffin I had opened. I lifted the lid and made sure that it was Marian French and I hadn’t imagined it. She was there all right.

If I could only get out of this vault I could bust the case wide open. The silence in the tomb was overpowering and I began to find breathing difficult. In a few hours, I thought dismally, we’d both suffocate.

I went back to Audrey and again turned out the flashlight. “If we get out of here,” I said, slipping my arm around her again, “shall we get married?”

She rested her head on my shoulder. “Hmmm,” she said, “but, do you really want to get married?”

“To you . . . more than anything else,” I said, knowing it to be the truth.

“It’ll be something to tell our children, won’t it? I mean that you proposed in a tomb.” Her voice was shaky, but she was trying hard to be flippant.

I kissed her. “We’ll get out all right,” I said, and as I spoke I felt a slight draught of wind against my face. I stiffened, then pulling her to her feet, I faced the door of the vault. “Not a sound,” I whispered, my

lips against her ear. “The door’s opening.”

We stood like that for a few seconds, then pushing her behind me I snapped on the flashlight.

The vault door was opening and as the beam of the flashlight shone on it, it swung wide.

I braced myself, expecting to see Elmer Hench, coming to finish us off, but instead, Reg stood there, blinking in the yellow light.

“I’m quitting,” he said in a strangled voice. “Brother, this is the end!”

I sprang forward and grabbed him by his coat collar. “Reg!” I shouted, while Audrey, pushing me away, threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

We were both all over him for a few seconds and then: “What happened?” I demanded, pulling him away from Audrey and shaking him.

“That’s right, spoil it all,” he said bitterly. “I was having a swell time. Can’t she kiss me just once more?”

“She can’t, you dope,” I said, delighted to see him again. “Hell! I thought you were dead.”

Reg looked over his shoulder into the darkness of the graveyard. “So did I,” he said, with a lot of feeling. “I would have been if those two had any guts.”

“Two?” I said sharply. “There were two?”

“Sure—Hench and someone else. Whoever it was with Hench did the rope trick. I was standing at the door keeping my eyes open when a sudden brilliant streak of lightning lit up the darkness. In that split second I saw Hench. He was standing a good fifty yards from me, but I could see him all right. I was going to yell to you when something fell over my head and before I could call out a cord had tightened around my throat and I was being dragged backwards—”

“I saw you,” I broke in. “It scared the pants off me.”

“You can imagine what it did to me,” Reg said, feeling his throat tenderly. “If I hadn’t used my head, I’d been stiff by now. I heard someone rush past me—I guess it was Hench—and then I heard the

vault door slam. I knew what that meant if they rubbed me out. The noose was pretty tight by now and I couldn't breathe. I kept my balance and I staggered towards the guy who was hauling on the rope. By doing that I managed to keep some slack on the rope, but not much. I felt myself blacking out and then—why I hadn't thought of it before I don't know—I remembered I was holding your gun. I started shooting. That did it. These two killers don't like anyone who hits back. They scrambled. The moment the guy let go of the rope I was okay. I gave 'em a couple more shots to help them on their way and then I came back to find out what had happened to you two. The door was locked and the key had gone, but after a while I found it lying in the grass where Hench had dropped it, and here I am."

I drew in a deep breath. "You didn't see who the other person was?" I asked.

Reg shook his head. "No—all I'm sure of is there was someone else with Hench."

Audrey put her hand in mine. "Don't you think we should go? They might come back."

"We're going in a moment," I said, squeezing her hand. "There's just one more thing to do and then we'll scram. You got a flashlight, Reg? Mine's nearly done."

He gave me a small pocket affair. "What's on your mind?" he asked anxiously. "I've had more than enough of this place."

"You've got the key of the vault?"

"Yeah." He held up the key so I could see it.

"Close the door and stand with your back to it. I'm opening one more of these coffins."

"Aw, you're crazy," he said, but he closed the door and put his back against it.

Audrey sat down on the step and rested her head against the stonewall. She looked white and drawn, but she didn't raise any objections.

I went over to the coffins again and set to work on the coffin next to the one I had already opened. In five minutes or so I had drawn all the screws and I lifted the lid. One glance was enough.

“Reg,” I called, “come here. Do you know who this is?”

He crossed the vault and stood at my side. “Ohmigod,” he said under his breath, and turned away. “That’s Luce McArthur.”

I lowered the lid and wiped my hands with my handkerchief; I was sweating ice.

“That’s good enough,” I said. “I’m not looking at the others. It’s a safe bet they’re all here. Come on, we’re going home, but we’ve got to get a police guard on this vault or the killer may try to hide ‘em again.”

Reg opened the vault door and stared into the darkness. It was beginning to rain. We crowded behind him and stood listening. The thick smell of tuberose, carnations, lilies, violets and jasmine saturated the hot, still air. The thunder was now a faint distant rumble, but rain fell in heavy isolated drops, making the sound of hundreds of taps on a slack drum.

“Do you see anything?” I whispered.

“Not a thing, but I don’t fancy walking through this darkness with a couple of killers hiding behind a tombstone waiting to jump on us,” Reg said uneasily.

“Suppose we spend the night here?”

I considered this, but I didn’t think Audrey could stand another six hours in the vault.

I shook my head. “We’ll go,” I said. “If we keep together, they’ll leave us alone. Maybe they’re miles away by now.”

I stepped into the pouring rain and the other two followed me. I shut and locked the vault, walked up the steps, passed through the iron gate and locked that.

I put the key in my pocket.

“Come on,” I said, taking Audrey’s hand. “Let’s go.”

In the beam of the flashlight sheets of black rain fell on the sodden cinder path. Willow trees dripped water dismally on us. On the distant horizon lightning flickered, lighting the grey, weeping clouds.

We walked steadily down the path, our ears pricked, and our hearts thumping. There was no sound in the burial-ground but the crunching

of gravel under our feet and the steady beat of rain on the leaves and foliage.

The attendant's white lodge loomed out of the darkness and we knew we were nearly there.

"I want that book," I whispered to Reg. "You two wait by the window."

Audrey clutched me. "No . . . we'll come with you. We're not separating for a moment."

"Okay," I said and paused to push up the window.

Five minutes later we were all in Audrey's car, speeding down the road towards our hotel. I had the attendant's register on my knee. Reg sat behind us, mopping himself with a sodden handkerchief and muttering under his breath.

"Tomorrow finishes it," I told them, "and it depends on you, honey, how it finishes."

"You tell me what to do," Audrey said quietly, "and I'll do it . . . only no more graveyards, please."

I patted her hand. "It won't be graveyards," I said, "but it won't be much better."

While I was speaking I spotted an all-night drugstore and I pulled up outside.

"I'll have a word with Beyfield," I went on. "I want that vault guarded."

I was lucky to catch Beyfield as he was leaving. He didn't sound very enthusiastic when he knew who was calling.

"By tomorrow night," I told him, "I'll have this case sewn up. If you want to be in on the ground floor you can help me now. If you don't want to help me, I'll take all the credit and you'll get a hell of a ribbing in the press."

"What's the idea?" he demanded. "If you know anything you come over to headquarters or I'll pinch you as accessory."

"Don't talk like a dope. I'll spill everything tomorrow night, but not till then," I snapped back. "I want you to detail a couple of men to

watch Crypt Twelve in the Cranville Cemetery. Get 'em there right away. All they have to do is to stick around and see no one tries to get in. I've got the key, but maybe there's a duplicate. I've enough evidence in that vault to split the case wide open."

He got excited. "The girls are in there, huh?" he demanded.

"Yeah, but hold everything until tomorrow night. I haven't got the killer yet. If you blow the lid off now you'll scare the killer into hiding. Even now he may be too scared to go ahead with the next murder. Will you give me until then?"

He finally agreed. "Okay, Spewack," he said. "I'll fix it, but we take over tomorrow night."

"Sure," I said, grinning at the telephone, "you'll take over all right."

I hung up and went out into the rain again.

I was up early the next morning, and leaving Reg and Audrey still in bed I went out to send off a long telegram to Colonel Forsberg. Then I went to a hospital equipment store and placed an urgent order with them.

By the time I returned to the hotel it was just after eleven o'clock. I tapped on Audrey's door.

"Come in," she called.

I found her sitting up in bed, a breakfast tray on the table beside her. She laid the morning paper down and smiled at me.

"Where have you been?" she asked, stretching out her hand.

I sat down on the bed and took her hand in mine. I thought she looked pretty good.

"I've been getting organized," I said. "Among other things I've bought the licence."

She laughed. "You haven't?"

I nodded. "I sure have," I said. "You don't think I'd let a chance like this slip through my fingers, do you? You said you'd marry me if we got out of that vault: Well, that's what you're going to do."

"I suppose it's all right," she said, pulling me to her. "It won't be all

fun being married to a detective, but at least I'll know most of the answers."

We had a nice intimate session together for the next five minutes and then she pushed me away.

"Now let's concentrate on business," she said. "What's going to happen?"

I lit a cigarette, smoothed down my hair and grinned at her.

"Plenty," I said. "For one thing you're having your last bachelor date. After tonight you'll never go out with any other man but me. That's something to look forward to."

"You mean—Ted?"

I nodded. "Yeah. We're going through with this. Maybe we've scared Ted. Maybe he won't try anything, but if he does—then we've got him."

"Do you really think he's the killer?" she asked. "I still can't believe it."

"He must be. It clicks. I think we'll find he's a sexual lunatic. Hench's covering up his crimes by hiding up the bodies," I said, seriously. "I hate asking you to do this, but unless we catch him red-handed he might beat the rap."

"What have I got to do?"

"You've arranged to go out with him tonight, haven't you? Well, all I want you to do is to keep the date. The rest—unless I'm mistaken—he'll do. You have nothing to worry about. Both Reg and I'll be right behind you."

"That sounds simple enough," Audrey said, "but you will watch out, won't you?"

"I'll watch out," I said, and kissed her. "Take it easy and don't be in a hurry to get up. There's nothing for you to do until tonight. I'll see you later."

I found Reg pacing up and down in our room. He looked up eagerly when I came in.

"What's cooking?" he asked. "Where have you been?"

“Fixing things,” I told him. “We can’t do much now until tonight. It all depends on Ted. If he doesn’t show up, then we’ll have to do it the hard way. If he does and starts anything—we’ve got him.”

“Audrey’s the bait, huh?”

I nodded. “She’s got guts,” I said. “I wish I didn’t have to ask her to do it.”

Just then the telephone rang. The desk clerk told me Beyfield wanted to see me.

I made a face at Reg. “Show him up,” I said into the telephone, and hung up.

“Beyfield’s on his way up,” I told Reg. “I hope he isn’t going to be difficult.”

A few minutes later Beyfield came in. He was wearing the same black and white striped suit and his big fleshy face wore a sour, suspicious look.

I waved him to the only armchair.

Reg sat on the window-ledge and I stood by the empty fireplace.

Beyfield sat down heavily. He didn’t take off his hat. He looked at Reg and then at me.

“I suppose you guys know what you’re doing,” he said, unpeeling paper from a package of chewing gum. “I haven’t told the chief what’s going on, and it’s worrying me.” He fed the strip of gum into his mouth and began to chew.

I eyed him thoughtfully. “I’m nearly ready to crack this case,” I said, “but right now the situation is tricky.”

“You’d better crack it,” he said sourly. “Macey’ll play hell if you foozle it.”

“Did you get those guards on the vault?”

He nodded. “A swell assignment. They loved it. They stopped there all night in the pouring rain listening to the stiff’s turning in their graves. I hope you weren’t fooling when you said the girls were in that tomb.”

“I wasn’t,” I said grimly. “I saw ‘em myself.”

“So it’s Esslinger?” He looked at me sharply.

I shook my head. “Not Max,” I said.

He waited, but I didn’t say anything more. We all stared at each other while the clock ticked off the minutes.

“The boy, huh?” he asked at last.

“Maybe. I’ll know tonight.”

He chewed some more and then said: “You’re smart. McArthur’s a friend of mine—that’s why I’m giving you a break.”

I thanked him.

“Macey wouldn’t give you a break. He’d bust open the vault,” Beyfield went on. “I’m sticking my neck out. You’d better crack this case.”

“Even if I don’t, I’ve found the bodies. That’s more than you’ve done,” I reminded him.

“Yeah,” he said. “Cranville’s punk.” He brooded for a while and then went on: “I guess this’ll finish Macey, and a good thing too.”

“I’m not interested any more in Cranville,” I said. “I want to get this killer fixed and then I’ll blow.”

“It’s where I have to live,” Beyfield explained, stretching out his long legs. “I don’t want Wolf running this town, and if Esslinger’s washed up, he might.”

“Esslinger’s washed up all right,” I said. “He’ll have to go. His brother-in-law’s tied up with the killings, and that alone is enough.”

“Sure is,” he said gloomily. “Maybe we’ll find some other guy to stand for mayor. I don’t want Wolf . . .”

“Maybe we could fix Wolf too,” I said, and went on to tell him about Edna Wilson.

He listened thoughtfully and then squinted at me. “Not much you’ve missed,” he said. “If that’s straight, we could fix Wolf.”

“It’s straight all right,” I said.

He got to his feet. “Okay, I’ll do something about that.”

“Have a word with Latimer,” I said. “He could fix it. A front-page story in the Cranville Gazette would blow the lid right off this town. Maybe they’d make you Chief of Police if you played it right.”

For a second a sour smile lit his face. “I’ve even thought of that,” he said. “Yeah, I’ll have a word with Latimer.”

“Want to be in on this?” I asked.

He looked at me questioningly.

“You could come along tonight. I don’t want the credit so long as Colonel Forsberg knows I’ve done my job,” I explained.

His face lit up. “Sure,” he said.

“Okay. Meet us here about seven o’clock. The three of us ought to be able to handle it.”

“I’ll be here,” he said, and moved to the door; then he paused. “I don’t like private dicks,” he went on, staring at the wall above my head, “but you ain’t such a bad guy.”

I laughed at him. “You don’t have to worry about me,” I said. “Look at the dough I’m earning.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I was forgetting that.” He nodded again and went out, closing the door behind him.

Reg snorted. “The big cheese,” he said. “He sees where he can horn in and he’s horning in. Why did you give him a break?”

I lit a cigarette and sank into the armchair, which was still warm from Beyfield’s great body. “Why not?” I said. “After all, we can only go so far. After that it’s a police job. So long as he fixes Macey and Wolf, why should we care?” I inhaled and then sent a long stream of smoke to the ceiling. “Like to come to New York, Reg? I guess Colonel Forsberg could use you.”

Reg stared at me. “You kidding?”

I shook my head. “There wouldn’t be much for you in this place now,” I pointed out. “Audrey and I are getting married.”

When he got through with his congratulations, I said: “How’s about it? Want to come?”

He nodded. "You bet," he said. "I'll come all right."

I stood up. "That's fine. Well, stick around. We can't do much until tonight," and I went to the door.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Me?" I grinned at him. "Be your age. I'm going to see my wife."

Just after six o'clock I entered Audrey's room with a square box under my arm.

She was sitting in front of her dressing table in a flame wrap, doing her hair.

"Where have you been?" she asked, swinging round and holding out her arms.

I set down the box, kissed her and sat down in the nearby armchair. "I've been busy," I said. "Heard from Ted?"

She nodded. "He telephoned an hour ago and asked me to meet him at Ciro's Club at eight."

"So it's on," I said, controlling my excitement. "Did he say anything?"

"Nothing that'd help," she said. "He was friendly and seemed excited about seeing me. He kidded me a lot, but nothing more. You know, I still can't believe..."

"We'll soon see," I said. "What are you wearing?"

"I thought a dress." She looked puzzled. "Why? Do you want me to wear something special?"

"I do," I said. "I want you to wear a white suit and a high-neck shirt or even a light sweater with a roll collar."

"It's too hot for that," she protested, but seeing the look in my eye, she paused. "You mean it's important?"

"You bet I do," I said. "I want you in white so I can see you in the dark and I want you to wear a polo neck sweater to hide this." I picked up the box and opened it.

"What on earth is it?" Audrey exclaimed.

“Just a little idea I had,” I said, taking out a plaster cast of her neck and shoulders. It was well made, strong, and in two pieces. “Now sit still a moment and let me try it on.”

“But why? What do you want me to wear that ghastly thing for?”

“With that around your neck,” I said quietly, “no one, try as he may, could strangle you. You don’t think I’m going to take any chances, do you?”

She gave me a quick, startled look, but said nothing. She opened her wrap and I fitted the cast on one shoulder. It fitted well. Then I put the other half on her other shoulder and fixed the straps. Her throat was completely protected from an inch or so below her ears. The cast did not touch her neck and did not restrict movement. I was pretty proud of it.

“But I can’t spend the whole evening in this!” she gasped. “Ted would notice it.”

“You don’t have to,” I said. “I wanted to see if it fitted. Before you leave the club, go to the ladies’ room and put this on. I’ll have it ready and I’ll give it to you at the right time. He won’t notice it in the dark.”

“How sweet you are!” she said. “Did you really think of this yourself?”

“Don’t kid me,” I said, grinning. “You’re going into danger, and I don’t want anything to happen to you. With that you’ll be all right. They can hang you from the roof and you’ll just laugh at them.”

“I hope they won’t do any such thing,” Audrey returned. “Now, you run off, because I want to change. Take my neck with you.”

I unstrapped the cast, kissed her and went to my room, where Reg was lying on the bed, smoking.

“I’m getting the jitters,” he said, sitting up. “Where’ve you been and what have you got there?”

I told him about the cast.

“Holy mackerel!” he exclaimed. “That’s an idea. But you don’t honestly think they’ll try to strangle her, do you?”

I lit a cigarette. “If they don’t, then I’m on the wrong tack,” I said. “But I’m taking no chances.”

"You've got something more up your sleeve," he said, regarding me suspiciously. "What else have you been up to?"

I grinned at him. "Plenty of time for that," I said. "I promised Beyfield I'd have this case sewn up, and with luck I will. But it's too early yet to tell you what's cooking."

He scowled. "All right, if you want to be mysterious," he said, "but think of my nerves . . ."

"I'll think of them," I said, and glanced at my watch. It was a quarter to seven. Time was moving slowly. I sat down to wait. While I was waiting I checked through my plans and found them sound. There was nothing more I could do.

At seven o'clock Beyfield arrived. He looked animated and he actually grinned at both of us as he entered the room.

"We're getting somewhere," he said, sitting on the edge of the bed. "I've seen Latimer and we're going to fix Wolf."

"What did it cost you?" I asked, knowing Latimer.

He winked. "I've got friends," he said. "There's a guy in this town who wants the Cranville Gazette. By this time tomorrow Wolf will be glad to sell out."

"Maybe you've even found another mayor?" I said, watching him closely.

"Maybe I have," he returned, "but it depends on you. If you don't pull this stunt of yours off tonight I'll be in a hell of a jam."

"I'll pull it off," I said. "How about a drink?"

He nodded. "I was going to suggest it," he said. "What's happening?"

I phoned down to the desk clerk and ordered drinks before I answered and then I told him that Audrey was meeting Ted Esslinger at Ciro's club and the rest depended on Esslinger.

"So it is Ted Esslinger?" he said, shaking his head. "It'll be a shock to his old man. I like Esslinger, but I don't care much for the boy. He's too fond of running around with the girls. At one time we had complaints, did you know that?"

I shook my head. "I heard he was wild, but I didn't know he was

vicious,” I said. “This boy Roger Kirk he goes around with might make a witness for the State.”

Beyfield grunted. “He’s as bad. Both of ‘em have been heading for trouble for some time. In a small town like Cranville it’s difficult to hide things up, but they’ve been smart up to now. I guess they’ve picked the kind of girl who’s too scared to talk. One or two of ‘em did complain, but Esslinger fixed it with Macey.”

His face showed his disgust. “You can fix anything with Macey if you have enough dough.”

The drinks came and I made three highballs. As we were finishing them Audrey came in. She looked swell in her white linen coat and skirt and her cashmere white and blue sweater.

Beyfield eyed her with open admiration.

“Well, I like that!” she exclaimed. “You three guzzling whisky and nothing for me! After all, I’m the one who’s going to be strangled.”

“Don’t talk that way,” I retorted. “And I don’t like my wife to drink whisky. I’ll buy you a gin at the club.”

She shook her head sadly. “I’m beginning to wonder if I’m being wise marrying you,” she said, pouring a small whisky into my glass and adding soda. “Until I’m married, I’m doing what I like. When I’m married I might do what you like—if it’s reasonable.”

“I bet you look after your wife better than that,” I said to Beyfield.

“My wife?” he said with a snort. “I haven’t seen her for six years and I don’t care if I never see her again.”

“I’m sure Mrs. Beyfield feels exactly the same,” Audrey said, smiling at him.

“So you’re both bound to be happy.”

I looked at my watch, “I think we’ll go,” I said. “Take a taxi to the club,” I went on to Audrey.

“We’ll be right behind the whole time. If Ted wants to take you some place, go with him. Before you leave the club, don’t forget this.” I tapped the box containing the plaster cast.

“I won’t,” she promised, and turning to the other two, she said: “I’m

sure you won't mind leaving me with my future husband for a moment. He might have other important but confidential things to say to me."

Beyfield moved to the door with an embarrassed smirk. Reg followed him.

Five minutes later we joined them in the hotel lobby and Audrey left in a taxi. We called another taxi and followed on behind.

"That dame's got guts," Beyfield said suddenly as if he couldn't contain himself any longer. "You're a lucky guy to get a dame like that."

"Don't I know it," I said soberly, meaning every word.

Ciro's club was the only bright spot in Cranville. When we arrived, just after eight, we were in time to see Audrey walking up the broad stairs to the bar.

"Reg," I said, "I want you to stick around outside. It's just possible, if there's a crowd in there, we'll miss her. You keep the taxi waiting and watch out. Understand?"

He nodded and we left him.

The bar was crowded and Beyfield and I pushed our way with difficulty to the front. I ordered two large whiskies, and while waiting I glanced over the heads of the crowd.

Audrey was sitting at a table near the door. She was alone.

"He hasn't turned up yet," I said to Beyfield in a low voice. "I wonder if he's got cold feet."

The barman served us the whiskies, nodded to Beyfield, whom he knew, and went away to serve other drinks.

We left the bar and sat down at the far end of the room where we could see Audrey without being seen ourselves.

We waited five minutes and then I saw a bellhop go up to Audrey and speak to her.

"Something's up," I said to Beyfield. "You wait here. I'll go over and see her."

As I approached, the bellhop went away.

Audrey stood up. "He's left a message," she said, her eyes a little scared.

"He wants me to go to 49 Maddox Avenue, right away. Friends of his are having a party there."

"Now we know," I said. "That's how he got the other girls to go to the house in Victoria Drive." I waved to Beyfield, who quickly joined us.

"Where's Maddox Avenue?" I asked.

"It lies at the back of Victoria Drive," he said, staring at me. "Why?"

"Ted's left a message for Audrey to join him there. He says friends of his are staging a party. The number of the house is forty-nine."

"Wait here a moment," Beyfield said, and lumbered off to a telephone. He was back within five minutes and his beefy face showed his excitement.

"It's an empty house," he said. "I've ordered a bunch of boys to be ready to surround it as soon as we go in. It certainly looks like you're on to something."

I gave Audrey the box I had been carrying. "Get that on, kid, and let's go."

She drew a sharp breath. "It's worse than having a tooth out," she said, with a bad attempt to smile. "And won't I be glad when it is over!"

We watched her go into the ladies' room and then we went downstairs to wait in the taxi.

Maddox Avenue was a dimly lit street with houses on one side and a large vacant lot on the other. Across the lot was the smelting works. The houses were widely spaced like the teeth in an old man's mouth and were grimed with years of sooty smoke. It was too dark to see much of their sordid appearance.

We all stood beside Audrey's taxi for the final talk before she went on to the house.

"Beyfield and I'll go first. We'll keep out of sight in the garden," I said.

“Reg, you come on after the taxi’s arrived.”

Audrey, leaning out of the taxi window, said a little anxiously: “And what do I do?”

“When you reach the house, ring the bell and wait. If Ted comes to the door, go with him. We’ll be right after you,” I said. “Have you a gun?”

“Yes . . . it’s in my bag.”

“Well, don’t keep it there. Have it in your hand, but keep it out of sight. If things get sticky and we don’t get there fast enough—shoot. Beyfield won’t mind.”

All the time we were talking, the taxi-driver listened, openmouthed. “Sounds like you’re going to have a party,” he burst out. “Jeeze! This’ll be something to tell my old woman.”

Beyfield curtly told him to pipe down.

“All set?” I asked.

They nodded.

I squeezed Audrey’s hand. “Don’t be scared,” I said, and lowering my voice so only she could hear, I said: “I love you a lot.”

Then I left her and Beyfield and I walked up Maddox Avenue, keeping in the shadows.

Number 49 was the last house in the street. It stood alone in a large garden and it looked dark and deserted. We approached it cautiously, and when we were a short way from it I spotted a light shining in the lobby.

“See that,” I whispered to Beyfield. “He’s there, waiting for her.”

“Suppose we bust in and pinch him?” Beyfield asked. “I don’t like that young woman going in there alone.”

“Nor do I,” I said shortly. “But what else can we do? We must catch him red-handed.”

We had stopped now and we were peering through the hedge that surrounded the garden. The rest of the house except for the lobby was in darkness.

“We’ll try the back. Maybe we can get in that way,” I murmured.

“My men should be around by now,” Beyfield whispered. He looked at his watch. The luminous dial showed eight-fifty. “Mind how you go or they’ll bend a club over your skull.”

I stepped back. “Then you’d better go first,” I said. “Your head looks like it could stand it better than mine.”

He grunted and moved forward. I followed him around the back of the house. We hadn’t gone far before a man rose out of the darkness. I caught a faint gleam of silver buttons and Beyfield called to him.

“Anything happening, Sergeant?” he asked.

The police-sergeant shook his head. “We ain’t been here more than a couple of minutes,” he said. “There’s someone in the house, but we haven’t disturbed them.”

“How many men have you got?”

“Six. They’re spread around the garden. I’ve told ‘em that anyone can enter the house, but no one must leave. That okay?”

“Sure.” Beyfield turned to me. “He’d better come with us, hadn’t he?”

“Okay, but no noise.”

We crept across the uneven ground to the back of the house. A cement path led up to the back door and as we walked softly forward we heard the taxi coming up the street.

I was nervous and my hands were shaking. I suddenly wanted to stop Audrey from going any further with this. It was only with a tremendous effort that I fought down my panic.

Beyfield was trying the back door.

“Locked,” he said, his lips against my ear.

I pushed him aside and examined the lock. It seemed a simple affair, and taking out my pocketknife I fiddled for a moment and then pushed open the door.

As I did so I heard the taxi stop outside the gate and a moment later a bell rang somewhere in the house.

I stepped into the kitchen and turned on my flashlight.

“She’s at the door now,” I murmured to Beyfield. “Give me a couple of minutes and then come after me. Leave the sergeant to guard the back door.”

He pressed my arm to show he understood and I went forward. I slid my hand inside my coat and eased the .38 police special from its holster.

The bell rang again, and as I opened the kitchen door, turning off my flashlight as I did so, I heard someone moving on the stairs.

I stood in the narrow, dark passage, my gun thrust forward, my heart hammering against my ribs, and waited. A shaded oil-lamp set high on the wall by the foot of the stairs shed a yellow light over the lobby.

A shadow appeared on the wall—a gaunt, crouching figure with long, thin hands and grotesque claw-like fingers. It moved swiftly and silently towards the front door. A moment later I saw it was Elmer Hench. He paused at the door, listened, and then jerked it open.

I heard Audrey catch her breath in a startled scream and then Hench’s bony fingers closed on her arm and pulled her inside. As she twisted away from him he closed the door and stood with his back against it.

“Good evening, Miss Sheridan,” he said, smiling at her.

In the flickering oil-lamp his gaunt, white face looked terrifying. Audrey baled away from him. She was so close to me, I could hear her quick, uneven breathing.

“Don’t be afraid, Miss Sheridan,” Hench said. “Ted’s waiting for you. He’s upstairs. All his friends are up there waiting for you. Go up and join them.”

Audrey stood as if paralysed.

Hench frowned at her and then his face writhed into a terrifying grin. “What are you waiting for?” he said, his bony fingers reaching out towards her and then drawing back. “Go up to Ted. He’s been waiting a long time for you.” He gave a smothered snigger. “He wants you.”

Very slowly, Audrey moved to the staircase. Not once did she take her eyes off Hench, who now stood motionless by the front door.

She put her foot on the first stair and then paused. I felt Beyfield breathing down my neck, but I didn't look round. I was watching Audrey with intent concentration.

Then it happened. There was a faint swish. Audrey screamed. Her hands went to the rope that had encircled her throat. Then she was drawn slowly upwards. As her feet left the ground, Hench, making a soft, snarling noise like an animal, threw himself at her knees and hung.

Then a gun exploded by my ear end I was half blinded by the flash.

I blundered forward as Hench folded up silently on the floor. I caught Audrey round her waist, lifted her and took her weight off the rope. She was limp, and for a moment I had a horrible fear that we were too late.

Beyfield, who had fired at Hench, whipped the noose from her neck, and I heard her say: "It's all right, Marc," and then she began to sob. Reg and the police-sergeant came blundering up.

"Take care of her," I said to Reg, and putting her into his arms I ran after Beyfield.

He waited for me at the head of the stairs.

"We've got him now," he said, between his teeth. "He can't get away. I've never seen anything to beat that."

"You'll see something better than that when I get my hands on the devil," I said savagely.

We moved down the dark passage, our flashlights throwing two big spots ahead of us. There were doors along one side of the passage and I went into each room as we came to it, while Beyfield stood in the passage, his gun ready in case the killer dashed passed me.

We tackled room after room in that way. It was nervy work and slow. Each empty room brought us nearer to the killer, lurking in the darkness and listening to our steady approach.

Finally there was only one room left.

"We've got him," Beyfield said, pushing me aside. "Come on out!" he shouted savagely. "Do you hear? Come on out with your hands in the air!"

There was a distinct movement inside the room.

“Come on out!” Beyfield roared again.

The police-sergeant and two cops came up and stood watching at the end of the passage. Their powerful flashlights lit up the worm-eaten door.

Steps crossed the room. Slow, light, undecided steps.

We raised our guns.

The door moved inwards and then was suddenly flung wide. Mrs. Esslinger stood looking at us, her lips in a hard line and her eyes like stones.

She wore the same black ill-fitting dress and on her head was a flat black hat covered with jet sequins. She stood staring at us and then suddenly she went into peal after peal of wild laughter.

* * *

We sat in the hotel lounge with drinks at our elbows and cigarettes burning.

It was our last night in Cranville and we were all a little high.

Beyfield was positively beaming. Things were going well for him. Already he could see himself as Chief of Police. As soon as the story was published the Governor of the State was certain to demand an inquiry. Macey would have to go.

Beyfield raised his glass and, with tipsy dignity, saluted me. “You’re a great guy,” he said. “A guy of sterling worth—even if you are a private dick.”

I thanked him.

Audrey rested her head on my shoulder and smiled secretly at the ceiling. “It was a fluke,” she said softly. “A beautiful fluke. Now I know how to be a successful detective. All I have to do is to pick on an innocent man and hope for a fluke. Come on, darling, admit it, you did think it was Ted.”

I grinned. "Well, for a while I thought it was Ted, but then I changed my mind." Seeing the look of outraged astonishment on her face, I went on hastily: "Okay, okay, I did think it was Ted, but I took the precaution to check up on Mrs. E. and her brother. Those two puzzled me. Anyway, how was I to know they were crazy? I haven't lived all my life in this town like you . . . you can't criticize."

Latimer sat up and looked at me with slightly bleary eyes. "Don't argue," he pleaded. "I want to write this story and how the hell can I write it if I don't know what it's all about?"

Reg patted his arm. "You're drunk," he said happily. "Forget the story and have another drink."

Latimer scowled at him. "Go away," he growled. "A story's a story to me no matter how drunk I am." He looked over at me. "Tell me about it. The old dame was nuts, but that don't explain everything."

"It does if you think about it," I said, playing with Audrey's curls. "I got her case history from Colonel Forsberg. I didn't like Mrs. E. and I thought it'd pay dividends to check up on her. And it did. She began life in a travelling rodeo show and she could handle a rope as well as any cowpuncher. Her father died in an asylum—he was a homicidal lunatic. So was she. She was put away when she was twenty but her brother got her out. They came East together and she married Esslinger. He didn't know anything about her past. Her brother kept an eye on her and when she started to slip, he lived with her. That's why Esslinger had to take him on as his manager. Esslinger knew by then, but he wasn't man enough to put her away."

Audrey sat up. "Where did you get all this from?" she demanded.

"That's one of the great advantages of working for an organization like International Investigations. Forsberg dug it out for me," I said. "Mrs. Esslinger had one obsession—her son. She was crazily jealous of him, and when he began to run around with girls she became deadly dangerous. Hench was crazy, but in a different way. He didn't kill . . . he embalmed. When Mrs. E. started strangling Ted's girlfriends. Hench had a swell time embalming them. He was smart enough to hide the bodies in the Esslinger family vault. But you know about that."

Latimer nodded. "Sure," he said. "Then there was nothing to the Street-Camera Studio?"

"I wouldn't say that," I returned. "In her crazy way, Mrs. E. was determined that Esslinger should be mayor. She saw a way of getting

at Starkey through the Studio and she concentrated on the girls whose photos had appeared in the shop window. You remember I found Mary Drake's handkerchief in the place? Well, I'll bet Hench planted that in the hope that either I or Ted would find it. Ted was genuinely convinced that Starkey had something to do with the killings because his mother told him so."

"And the girls—anything in the fact they were all blondes?"

I pulled Audrey closer to me. "Only that Ted preferred blondes, as I do. You can't beat a nice blonde."

"It's a cinch," Beyfield said, smiling at me. "Boy! Am I going to be pleased when I see Macey's face tomorrow? I'll skin that fat punk alive."

"I can't understand why Hench and Mrs. Esslinger should have tried to kill me after they knew we had found the bodies," Audrey said. "You'd've thought they would have waited a while."

"They were crazy—the pair of them," I said. "We baited the trap and they couldn't resist walking into it."

"But where was Ted all the time?" Audrey asked. "Why didn't he keep his date with me?"

"Mrs. E. fixed that. He told her he was going out with you and she saw her opportunity. She got Hench to call Ciro's club and leave the message for you to meet Ted at Maddox Avenue. Then she delayed Ted from reaching you punctually and, of course, when he arrived you'd gone. I bet she pulled the same trick with the other girls."

"That all?" Latimer asked, stubbing out his cigarette.

"I guess so. That'll give you a swell story. Don't forget to give Beyfield all the credit."

Beyfield beamed.

"If you want a hand in putting that story together," Reg said, "I'll help you."

Latimer got to his feet. "Come on then. We'll get the story away and then we'll make a night of it."

"See you early tomorrow, Reg," I called after him. "I'm catching the

first train out.”

Beyfield finished his drink and stood up. “Well, I won’t keep you folks out of your beds,” he said, holding out his hand. “I’m almost sorry you’re going. The next time you come to Cranville, you’ll be surprised at the changes. With Macey and Wolf out of here, things will begin to smell sweet again.” He glanced over his shoulder and then, lowering his voice, he whispered: “From the way things look I shouldn’t be surprised if McArthur isn’t made mayor. I’ve got a guy who’ll back him and he’s a smart little punk if he’s kept away from his wife,” He closed one eye and wavered unsteadily before us. “Well so long,” he said, beaming at us; “see you in church.”

He began an unsteady journey across the room, leaving us alone together.

“He’s quite nice really, isn’t he?” Audrey said, putting her hand in mine.

“A copper’s always nice if he’s getting something out of you,” I returned.

“Come on, sweetheart, let’s go to bed.”

She looked at me. “I know the joke’s on me,” she said, “but you remember you said Max Esslinger didn’t think I could crack the case — if he did say that, why did he hire me?”

I grinned at her. “Mrs. E. persuaded him against his better judgment,” I said, putting my arm round her, “She thought with you on the case —”

“That’s enough from you,” Audrey broke in hastily, “and don’t you dare laugh.”

I pulled her to me and kissed her.

THE END